

Unveiling Dutch America

The New Netherland Project

To get the truth one must ... go into the archives for the past,
and let those long dead speak in their own defense.¹

(William Elliot Griffis, 1843-1928)

122

[P E T E R A . D O U G L A S]



Justus Danckerts's *Novi Belgii Novaeque Angliae*, a map of New Netherland and New England. Mid-1650s, engraved as a copy of Nicholas Visscher's 1651 composite map. Photo www.nnp.org.

The New World colony of the Netherlands was called 'New Netherland' and 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 the continent, and yet its 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, whose inhabitants must thus be vaguely aware that there is some lost part to their history.

The Dutch period in North America began in 1609 with Henry Hudson's exploration of the river that would be given his name. In 1614 the New Netherland

Company was licensed by the States General of the United Provinces for fur trading in the newly discovered region, and in 1621 the West India Company was chartered to trade in Africa, Brazil, and North America. The Company sent the first colonists to New Netherland in 1624, and by 1664 the population is estimated at around 9,000.

While it's clear that there was a lot going on in Dutch America, it has undeservingly remained a historical backwater. The reason was the 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 said 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.'*²

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 creation in 1974 of the New Netherland Project, leading to Charles Gehring's translations of the surviving seventeenth-century Dutch records. This was a turning point in American historiography, and the work still goes on after thirty-four years. To understand the true importance of this work it is necessary to see how things were before.



Henry Hudson
Memorial Column in
Henry Hudson Park
(Riverdale, The Bronx).

A lost world

Until recently a schoolchild's knowledge of colonial America – or anyone else's for that matter – was typically limited to the familiar Anglocentric story. According to New Netherland Project staff: *'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.'*³ 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.'*⁴

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 they 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. Perhaps the name Peter Stuyvesant broke the surface, but little else. Part of this misapprehension stems from the writings of Washington Irving, whose droll Knickerbocker tales were taken as fact, consigning the American Dutch image to mere caricature and comedy.

New Netherland has been called *'the forgotten colony'*, *'a lost world'*, and *'history's debutante'*.⁵ Why this is so is not hard to fathom. The records are in seventeenth-century Dutch, making them impenetrable to all but a handful of



The Dutch monument in Battery Park, NYC.

scholars who specialise in this rarefied linguistic interest. Despite partial early translations, this simple language barrier eclipsed the Dutch story, preventing historians from giving it its full and rightful exposure. And the victors write the history books. In this case 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 but official records were thenceforth in English. For all the struggling cultural persistence of the Dutch, 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. The result was that the vast space between the English-held lands was overlooked and the facts neglected or garbled by contemporary English versions. The story of America became the account of what happened in the colonies to the north and south of New Netherland.

Diverse dangers and misfortunes

What are these documents? 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 that dealt with the affairs of the entire colony. The register of the Provincial Secretary contains court depositions, bonds, leases, deeds, and other legal instruments that formed the legal basis for land titles. The records contain matters relating to local communities as well as those dealing with various regions of New Netherland as a whole, including the Netherlands Antilles. There are also laws, 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 the papers survived in perfect condition, the translators' hurdles would still have been substantial. However, they 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 around 1686-90 during the merger of the New England colonies known as the Dominion of New England. The Dutch records were moved to the administrative centre in Boston and then back to New York; it can only be imagined what was left behind or lost on these journeys. During the slave insurrection in 1741 in New York a fire broke out in the fort where the Dutch records were kept. The documents were thrown into the street to save them, and inevitably many were lost. The documents spent much of the Revolutionary War in the holds of English hulks moored in New York harbour and consequently faced many perils such as dampness and the gnawing of rats. Dr Gehring has translated many pages edged with teeth marks.

After these diverse dangers 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 there. The restless documents were again moved to the New York State Library in 1881. However, they 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 western end of the State Capitol in Albany burned – a great calamity as this was then the site of the State Library. The catastrophic fire destroyed some 450,000 books and 270,000 manuscripts, some of the latter being Dutch papers. Those that were not completely burned were singed or otherwise damaged. What remained of the records were heaps of baked and charred papers, water-damaged and frozen into black clumps. So many of them are now little more than 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 the reason why 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.

Despite the losses, primary source information on the Dutch colonies is not lacking as some 12,000 pages survived, preserved in the New York State Archives. For all that has been lost, the body of existing documents forms a

Dr Janny Venema of the NNP examining a document, singed at the edges and missing bits, using a magnifier.
Photo by Dietrich Gehring.





Portrait of Peter Stuyvesant on a stained-glass window at St Mark's, NYC.

large 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.

Early translation attempts

Over the last two centuries several people have attempted to organise and translate these papers, but the results were unsound and selectively done, often with personal bias and bowdlerisation: anything considered salacious or offensive to nineteenth-century translators was passed over. The first concerted effort to make the documents accessible for historical research was in 1818 when Governor Clinton commissioned Adriaen van der Kemp to translate the records.⁶ But his work was unreliable due 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 second-rate work nevertheless offered the only access to the New Netherland period throughout much of the nineteenth century.

The largest body of work was achieved by Edmund O'Callaghan (1797-1880), an Irish-born Canadian doctor, journalist, and political reformer. O'Callaghan devoted himself with indefatigable energy to the publication of documents relating to the colonial period. Before doing his own translations, in the 1850s he dismantled and re-assembled the Dutch records in accordance with his ideas of chronology and record type, destroying forever their archival integrity. As a translator O'Callaghan was an improvement over Van der Kemp, but his lack of knowledge of seventeenth-century culture was a limitation. 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 geographical groupings, losing all sense of contextual connection and continuity.

For all their scholarly zeal, the work of these early translators was inconsistent and included only a small part of the total New Netherland archives. Their attempts were ambitious but unreliable, and limited by their imperfect understanding of the seventeenth-century Dutch experience, culture, and terminology. 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 translate and edit them himself. His work has earned him the status of the brightest star in this early scholarly constellation. While he judiciously consulted the patchy 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. 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. Although devastated by the fire, this became his life's work until he retired in 1939.

After Van Laer's death in 1955, any scheme for translating these Dutch records was all but forgotten. Until Dr Gehring's translations, historians had little choice but to rely on the small portion of the Dutch records that had so far been deciphered, and despite their deficiencies they were widely used for want of anything better. Most of the documents remained locked in their original language, and a thorough disclosure of Dutch America would have to wait.

Van Laer's work was finally published in 1974 under the auspices of the Holland Society of New York, stimulating a 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 its establishment. 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.

And clearly it was time. Dr Tucker hailed the publication of Van Laer's translations by asserting in the preface that it was time to end 'the intellectual black-out 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.'⁷ 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.'⁸ When Christoph made the acquaintance of Charles Gehring, a scholar with a doctorate in Germanic linguistics, at a history conference in the early 1970s it was an auspicious meeting. Charles Gehring was the ideal choice to be involved in the rekindled translation project, and his association with Christoph



Dr Janny Venema
and Dr Charles
Gehring of the NNP.
Photo by Dietrich
Gehring.

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 Dr Gehring as translator and editor of New York colonial documents. A full thirty-five years after 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 America's Dutch past squarely in the limelight.

The Project's purpose is to translate and edit for publication the surviving archival records of New Netherland. These are a major source for the study of early history, government, and culture in the region. 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 and not just the events on Manhattan Island. Secondary objectives are to collect copies of these seventeenth-century Dutch manuscripts relating to New Netherland held in other repositories to centralise the source material, and to publish documents online, starting with volumes of translations no longer in print.

Peter Schenk's view of 'New Amsterdam, a Small Town in New Holland in North America, on the Island of Manhattan, Renamed New York when it Became Part of the Territory of the English'. 1702.

Photo www.nnp.org.



The translation process

Since 1974 thousands of delicate pages have passed through Dr Gehring's hands. Now he takes a document 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. 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, the translator says he doesn't notice it any more.

The fragile paper is baked to a tan colour and scorched black and cracked around its edges. 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 that depends on the nature of the text and the condition of the manuscript. To the appalling physical state of the pages other problems must be added. The translator's art is difficult and frequently dissatisfying. Skill and patience are required to grasp the words' subtle layers of meaning and extract and convert their intended sense, balancing the literal meaning of the original with the correct and natural equivalent expression in English. Add to these customary prob-

lems 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.

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 a knowledge of modern Dutch helps only so much. Historical documents contain words that have not survived. 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.

The orthography is not English, and this adds an initial unfamiliarity to the florid and sometimes challenging penmanship, which is very different from German *Frakturschrift* and English secretary hands. The Dutch devised their own secretarial style, though variations and irregularities are attributable to the techniques and personalities of numerous individual clerks over the many



Dr Martha D. Shattuck
of the NNP.

Photo by Dietrich
Gehring

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 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 all the stages of publication. Dr Gehring has had help over the years, most notably, since 1985, the invaluable assistance of his colleague and now Assistant Director Dr Janny Venema, who graduated from transcribing the documents to translating them too. Since 1988 the demanding and essential tasks of research, editing, and indexing the translations have been accomplished by Dr Martha D. Shattuck.

Finally, 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. There is a strong personal relationship here, and the translators can't help but wonder about the writers with whom they might spend days or weeks, and speak of them as if they were old family friends, each with his individual quirks and personality.

The achievements of the project

The translations lay bare thousands of intimate vignettes and the workings of a long-defunct society. As the Project's website states, 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, lives 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, analyse, and integrate into their teaching and writing.

While these 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 seventeenth-century society. 'The social history is bubbling up between the lines,' says Charles Gehring.⁹ As each volume is published, it provides 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.

The Dyckman House, the last Dutch colonial farmhouse in Manhattan, built c.1784 and opened as the Dyckman Farmhouse Museum in 1916.



One major problem was recognised from the start. The Project could not succeed as a purely 'ivory tower' operation. The objective was both to create the material and to 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 fulfil their mission the Project staff require communication and interaction with the world they are helping. In 1991 Dr Gehring neatly summed up the job he faced, then seventeen years into the Herculean task 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.*'¹⁰ The challenge is more than just to add volumes to library shelves; it is also to broadcast the availability of this new source material far and wide.

Beginning in 1979, the Project furthered interest in its work and in the Dutch period by organising the annual Rensselaerswijck Seminars – named for the historic patronship in the Albany region – on numerous topics relating to New Netherland. Few were aware of the Project's existence and achievements, and 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 to give papers on aspects of an annual theme.

Another form of outreach, since 1985, is *De Nieuw 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.

The New Netherland Institute is the Project's support structure, established in 2005 and originally set up in 1986 as Friends of the New Netherland Project. It sustains and promotes the Project and helps maintain its financial security, as well as fostering interest in the Dutch role in America's history. In its effort to push the Project's visibility, the Institute is increasing awareness of New Netherland through public programmes, services, and publications. The Institute's 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.*'¹¹

The work of the Project has proven valuable to a variety of entities with related interests. These include the city of Albany, whose mayor has enlisted the help of Drs Gehring and Venema in identifying 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 organisation 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. 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.

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.

Most crucial has been the effort to penetrate universities, engaging the scholars who write the history books to get 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. All this assiduous labour must be absorbed into a new continuum of America's story, made use of by historians who can finally get to grips with what has for so long been inaccessible, and so rescue the Dutch contribution from '*the dustbin of American history*.'¹² 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*.'¹³

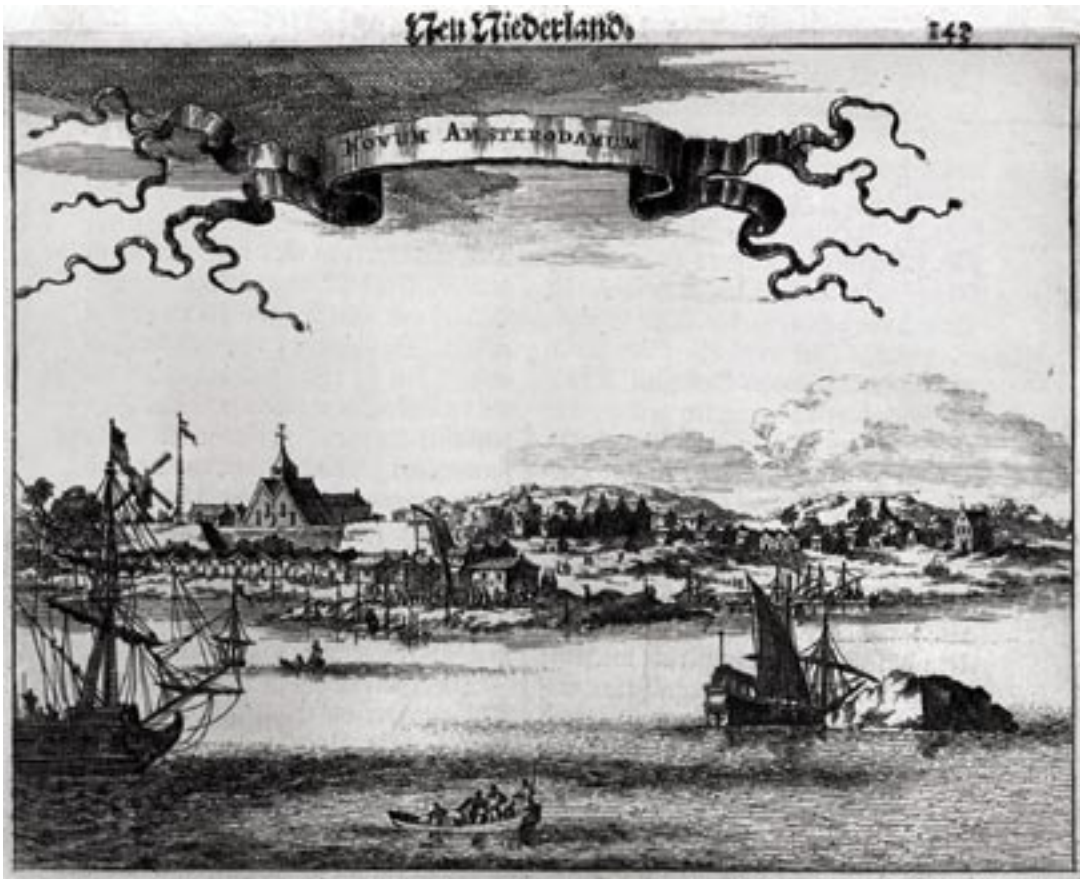
To date nineteen volumes of the New Netherland Documents series have been published, representing approximately sixty-five percent of the total. The Director estimates that it will take another twenty years to fulfil the project's mission, though many variables affect such a timeline, especially the availability of funding. In 2001 the journalist Paul Grondahl wrote: '*The work has become Gehring's Sistine Chapel*.'¹⁴ In fact, Michelangelo spent a mere four years on that ceiling, but we get the point.

In 1994, twenty years after the Project's inception, Dr Gehring's work on behalf of New Netherland was formally recognised 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 honour is for outstanding service to the Netherlands, and for the same reason was awarded to A.J.F. Van Laer in 1937.¹⁵ The award is the highest honour 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'

New Netherland is our new Cinderella, once undeservedly neglected and now lifted from darkness to recognition and significance. 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"*.'¹⁶

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.



Arnoldus Montanus' *Novum Amsterdamum* (1671). It depicts New Amsterdam as it looked in 1651. Photo www.nnp.org.

The translation project is ongoing, and the information brought to light has already contributed much to the clarification and rehabilitation of the Dutch role in America's story. Thanks to thirty-four 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. ■

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NOTES

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