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“What Historians Really Know about New York’s History.”
Firth Haring Fabend

Talk Prepared for the Annual Meeting, Friends of New Netherland, January 22, 2000,
New York, NY, in Response to Ric Burns’ Film “New York: A Documentary History.”

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Ric Burns' film "New York" was shown on Monday evening, November 15, 1999, on PBS. By the end of the week, the e-mails were flying among historians of New Netherland, and the question had been posed "*What to do?*" I suggested at the least a letter to the *New York Times*. The *Times* had not only been a financial backer of the film, but its coverage of it had been offensive. Headline on November 21, 1999: "A Metropolis Made Great by Greed. New York Has a Credo, But 'You First' isn't it." Referring to the purchase of Manhattan from the Indians, the *Times* went on: "Children do not re-enact in school plays the Minuit moment, perhaps because it is hard to imagine celebrating a development deal that enshrined capitalism—some would say 'greed'—as the primary force in the city's growth and identity." The filmmakers definitely took the line that greed was the primary force in the city's history, and this was to be the primary thrust of their film. New York was built on greed, Dutch greed.

Charles T. Gehring, Director of the New Netherland Project in Albany, N.Y., an NEH-funded translation and publication effort now in its twenty-sixth year, asked me to write the letter. I agreed to *draft* a letter and to e-mail it around for others' input. By the following Tuesday, November 23, after much to-ing and fro-ing, the letter with twenty-one signators went off to the *Times* by e-mail. It never got in. It was probably too long at that point, although I did send a short version as well as the long version, and/or too late. No longer newsworthy.

There are in general four areas in the film for criticism. The first area concerns the kind of errors that are perhaps inevitable in a presentation that tries to telescope four decades of history into twenty minutes. For instance, the film seems to suggest that New Netherland was an intentional "experiment in multiracialism and multiculturalism." New Netherland was intended originally as a base from which to exploit the fur-trade, and eventually as an agricultural community to support the trade. It was also a geopolitical entity to keep the English to the north and south at bay and a locus in the Atlantic trade in slaves, lumber, produce, and manufactured goods. But it was never conceived as "an experiment to see if all the peoples of the world could live together in a single place."

Nor can the first settlers be described as French-speaking Belgium Huguenots, because the term Belgium did not come into use until the late eighteenth century. They were French-speaking Walloon Protestants, West India Company employees transported to New Netherland to develop a local agricultural base to support the fur trade. In any case we are not even sure that

they were the first settlers in 1624; there may have been an earlier group of settlers in 1623. And all thirty families certainly did not settle at the tip of Manhattan in 1624. To support its strategy of exploiting the fur trade, the Company dispersed the families to Fort Orange upriver, to the Connecticut and Delaware River valleys, and to Governors Island. In 1626, at Peter Minuit's direction, they were resettled on Manhattan for safety from the Indians. It would be tiresome and unproductive to belabor such nitpickings here, however. There are more egregious shortcomings in this film.

The second sort of errors are errors of omission. The film ignores some of the most important developments in the history of New Netherland: The law courts and how they fostered the development of an orderly community. The charters establishing local town governments in the 1640s and 1650s. The beginnings of representational government in the Board of Nine Men, an advisory group that in 1649 severely took Governor Stuyvesant and his Council to task for their self-interest and lack of concern for the welfare of the colony's future and its inhabitants. Theirs was the very voice of modernity speaking, but it gets no notice in the film. The incorporation in 1653 of New Amsterdam as a municipality, modeled on the Dutch style, with new courts of inferior justice. The institutionalization of poor relief modeled on Holland's. But to cover this sort of civic seriousness would undermine the film's central theme and viewpoint, that New York was built on Dutch greed.

The third type of error are the errors that simply ignore recent research that it is known for a fact the filmmakers were aware of. Two examples: Probably the most important event to take place up to this point anywhere in the colonies was Leisler's Rebellion in 1689. Technically not in the actual time frame of New Netherland, because it was now New York, still, the Rebellion was strongly related to political and religious currents in what had been New Netherland, in the Netherlands, in England, and in France. Yet the film dismisses this New World extension of the Glorious Revolution in England in one glib sentence: "Jacob Leisler, a local merchant, led an armed uprising against the English government that was soon put down." How gross a simplification and misinterpretation of that complicated affair! One might ask, Why include it at all? And then one realizes: What a missed opportunity that would be for showing a grisly (therefore audience pleasing) graphic of Leisler swinging from the gallows.

Another case where the film ignored research the makers were well aware of, because they had interviewed the author of it, is also a case in early New York, rather than New Netherland itself, but it illustrates the approach they took to the truth. The persistent legend of Royal Governor Lord Cornbury dressed in women's clothing and walking on the ramparts of the fort at the Battery was thoroughly investigated by Professor Patricia U. Bonomi in her recent book *The Lord Cornbury Scandal*. But rather than present Professor Bonomi's reasoned analysis, and her conclusion that Cornbury's enemies in that age of gossip and slander did everything they could to ruin his reputation, including in all probability concocting this juicy story about him, the producers produced a folklorist who

managed to perpetuate the salacious legend that the famous portrait at the New York Historical Society is “in fact Lord Cornbury” in drag, as it were. Again, an audience-pleasing tactic, if it skirts (pardon the expression) the truth.

Now we come to the fourth and to my mind the most egregious category of what was wrong with the film. We might call these errors errors of perpetuation. They perpetuate old stereotypes lingering in the public consciousness since the early nineteenth century when Washington Irving introduced them in his *Knickerbocker's History of New York*. Brendan Gill, a now-deceased writer for the *New Yorker*, with no known expertise in the history of New Netherland, except possibly that he had read Irving in his childhood, starts it off, asserting in the most authoritative manner possible that the “Dutch didn’t give a damn about anything but making money.” This is a distortion of the facts, to put it mildly. The directors of the Dutch West India Company, which was given control of the colony in 1621, were interested in making money, of course. That was their responsibility as the directors of a trading company. But they were intent on making that money in the Caribbean, rich in spices as well as in the salt needed at home for the Dutch herring industry, and in sugar-rich Brazil, not in New Netherland. For years they let New Netherland twist in the wind. When they did turn their attention to it, it was in a lackluster and inefficacious way that did not move the colony forward on a firm footing. Far from greedy for the opportunities of New Netherland, few Dutch, except the roughest and hardest of fur trappers, cared to leave the comparative comforts of the United Provinces to attempt the wilderness of North America in the second, third, and even fourth decades of the seventeenth century. Three out of five of the known 174 immigrants to Rensselaerswijck between 1630 and 1644 were single men, farmers, laborers, or servants. The rest were small tradesmen of various types. The settlers who eventually began to emigrate to New Netherland in the 1640s, fifties, and early sixties, when the Dutch West India Company began to entice them thither with virtually free land and other guarantees, came not to “make money” in the big get-rich-quick way the film implies. The majority of them were obscure farming families looking for economic betterment, a step up the ladder, sheer survival, whatever. They had a hard time when they got here, and in addition to farming they worked a trade and sometimes two or three, on the side dabbling in the lively real-estate market to make ends meet and to get ahead. By this time the fur trade was in decline, and the earlier clandestine trade in furs that had sustained some settlers was no longer a source of income. Some of them eventually got rich, though not from farming. Some prospered in a modest way. Some failed.

Nevertheless, Professor Kenneth Jackson, editor of the *Encyclopedia of New York City*, expands on the film’s greed theme: “The Dutch came here to make a buck,” he says confidently. “This drive has dominated New York ever since.” Leaving aside the reality that few don’t have to “make a buck” in order to live, Jackson gives no attention to the fact that the coast of North America in the seventeenth century could be likened to a small island in very big sea, where everything was, as it is on islands, more expensive. The cost of living in New

Netherland was much higher than in the United Provinces, and, yes, greedy traders and merchants marked up their wares with little conscience, knowing their power over their captive customers. But should the ordinary inhabitants of New Netherland be forever remembered as greedy grasping money grubbers because of a few who were? Were the Pilgrims forever characterized as thieves because the first thing they did when they got off the boat was to help themselves to the Indians' corn? Survival, survival, survival.

Brendan Gill again: "And the more money they made the closer they thought they were to God. And it was only after they made it, that they set up churches to thank Him for generously setting things up for *them*." Now, if he were still among us, we would have to ask Brendan Gill his source for such a ridiculous statement. A third speaker echoes Gill, suggesting, perhaps, that the producers put the same tedious words in their mouths as they diligently pursued their central theme: "New Netherland was founded for no other reason than to make a buck." Then this speaker adds a bright thought of his own: "The Dutch were so devoted to making a profit that they didn't get around to building a church for seventeen years."

To correct that impression, accompanying the settlers in 1624, or arriving shortly thereafter, was a lay preacher of the Reformed faith to lead them in worship, comfort them in sickness and death, marry them, bury them. He was not ordained, so he was not permitted to baptize or offer communion. But in 1628, only four years later, because the people wanted one and needed one, an ordained minister of the Reformed Dutch Church in the Netherlands answered a call to the colony. He soon organized the first formal church in New Amsterdam in a large room over the horse mill, at Exchange Place today. The Reformed Church in America today dates its origins to that event in 1628. It took a few more years to gather the funds together to build the "church in the fort" because there was little financial support coming from the supervising body in the mother church, the Classis of Amsterdam. But the inhabitants wanted a church, and they got it, in 1628, not "seventeen years later." Ken Jackson pontificates that New Netherland was not set up so that the Dutch people "could practice their religion." No, it was not set up with that in mind, but as soon as the people came they did practice their religion, and the Dutch West India Company in their formal contracts with them was the first to acknowledge the importance of their being able to do so. The explanation for this--that in Holland it was the practice for civil authorities to support the Reformed Church's policies and for the Church to support the civil authorities' policies in a mutual thrust at civic order and comity--is completely overlooked in the film.

Everyone knows that the Puritans in New England called their settlement "their city set upon a hill," their new Israel, their new Jerusalem, their "light unto the world." But who knows that, less spectacularly, the Reformed Dutch in New Netherland had a modest metaphor of their own for their new land? They called it "their Reformed Zion," a promised land of milk and honey where they could practice their religion as they wished. And if they wished to practice it in their

own way, which was not always easy to do at home, they could do it here, and they did: orthodox and formal and by the book, or pietist and informal and from the heart. It is an aspect of New Netherland and its aftermath in Dutch New York and New Jersey that is often misunderstood, when it is not ignored, which has been more often the case, I might add.

Related to the supposed lack of religion in the colony are lurid descriptions of its degenerate inhabitants—and yet, predictably, no mention of the fact in this context that research has shown that half of these degenerates were ethnically and racially other than Dutch. Drunkenness everywhere, the film reports, New Amsterdam a mudhole, a sinkhole, pigs rooting in the streets, one tavern for every twenty people, “Dodge City” no less. “The Dutch period set the pattern for the behavior of the future,” that is, presumably, the present. Do we recognize it? Yes, there is truth in the descriptions, given human nature and the conditions of the frontier. But there is another truth that is allotted no brief in this film.

Let’s go on to another topic, which also has a religious context: Peter Minuit’s acquisition of Manhattan from the Indians. Professor Paul Otto, an expert on this topic, has this to say regarding the film’s presentation: “Whether the Dutch got a good deal or not is not the point for historians today, nor was it the point at the time. More important, the transfer of land meant that the Dutch staked a claim to the region, and this meant the first step toward the loss of Indian sovereignty over their territory. It meant the beginning of a painful process of cultural conflict and acculturation between the Dutch and the Munsees, who disputed the meaning of land ownership, land transfers, and land use.”

What Professor Otto saying, in effect, in the phrase “disputed the meaning of land ownership” is that the Munsees and other Indians viewed the ownership of land from what might be called a theological perspective: For them, their relationship to the land was a spiritual one. It was theirs communally, to use and to allow others to use, and to use again, when they wished to. It could not be alienated away from the community on a permanent basis. Europeans viewed land in a different way. But I would mention that Europeans, on their side, also viewed land ownership from a theological perspective. In the beginning, to paraphrase the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius, God gave all the land to everyone in common, but he also conferred upon the human race a general right over things so that, using his reason, each man could take whatever land he wished for his own needs. The American Indian did not avail himself of this God-given opportunity exercised by right-thinking Christians, because he lacked reason, so it went, and other evidences of civilization; thus land that he was not using could be taken from him by those who would use it. And this is what happened, with the Dutch careful to operate within the law of their land as formulated by Grotius within this theological framework. The Dutch colonial administrators followed strict guidelines from the directors of the West India Company, which in 1625 instructed them to find a place for the headquarters of the colony that was abandoned by the Indians or unoccupied. “And if there were none but those that are occupied by the Indians, they shall see whether they cannot, either in return for trading-goods or by means

of some amicable agreement, induce them to give up ownership and possession to us, without however forcing them thereto in the least or taking possession by craft or fraud.”

This is an important idea that the film should have brought out. But then, it's not as audience pleasing as the notion that the crafty and greedy Dutch somehow bilked the poor and unsuspecting Indians out of their patrimony. Of course, it is true that Grotius and Locke and other thinkers among the European colonial nations were using the Bible to rationalize their countries' land grabs. As one commentator has put it, “nothing could reflect more clearly the aggressive colonialism of the Dutch and English than the assumption that we actually possess everything on earth and it is up to each individual person or nation to grab its claim before anyone else can.” But we have to keep in mind also that, in the seventeenth century, the Bible was taken literally by almost everybody. And the American Indian, because of what was perceived as his wild and degenerate life style, was seriously considered to be a disciple of Satan. He needed to be reformed and civilized and Christianized so that he too would understand the importance of enclosing the land, grazing animals on it, and in general behaving as God had ordained. As an aside, I have to wonder if we fail to include this theological background in our history curriculums because of our national horror of “religion in the schools,” or because of our preoccupation with political correctness.

One of the most blatant faults of all in the film is that it hardly hints at the influence of Dutch political precedents on the political institutions and traditions of the United States. So many things, Professor Jackson opines, have their origins in New Amsterdam. And then he goes on to name, prominently, congestion and crowding. He neglects to name freedom from tyranny, the right to rebel, the federal structure of our government, freedom of the press, religious toleration, freedom of the conscience and so on. Mike Wallace, a co-author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Gotham* and a prominent commentator in the film, gets a little closer to reality when he takes up the matter of the Jews who arrived in 1654 from Brazil and Peter Stuyvesant's efforts to exclude them from the community. At this the Dutch West India Company directors in Amsterdam remind Stuyvesant that he is running a business colony, and that the Jews are good investors. Besides, they tell him, “the consciences of men ought to be free,” as if they had just thought of this.

What Wallace doesn't mention is that the directors were referring in this remark specifically to the fundamental law of the United Provinces, the Union of Utrecht of 1579, which had stated, a century and more before the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, that “each person shall remain free, especially in his religion, and that no one shall be persecuted or investigated because of their religion.” In the years immediately preceding the Union of Utrecht, the Pacification of Ghent in 1576 and the Peace of Religion in 1577 had laid the groundwork for this religious freedom we count so precious today. And of course the Union of Utrecht was the inspiration for Benjamin Franklin's “Join, or Die” philosophy in 1754 and eventually for the Articles of Confederation and

the U.S. Constitution. Even more interesting, the language and ideology of the U.S. Declaration of Independence so strongly reflect that of the Dutch Act of Abjuration of 1581, declaring Dutch freedom from Spanish tyranny, that Thomas Jefferson is believed by some scholars to have looked to it as one of the models for the Declaration. But Ho Hum. Boring. Remember the Nielson Ratings and all that.

Finally, one last indignity. A professor at Baruch College, referring to Peter Stuyvesant as Pete, waxes forth on why the citizens of New Amsterdam didn't defend themselves against the English navy in 1664. "Why would they care who ruled them?" she asks. "They only wanted to make money. Not a one of them even took up the English offer to let them return to Holland. The day after the English came, everyone went back to work as if nothing had happened at all." It is important that those who are teaching colonial American history know that the legacy of the Dutch to America did not stop in 1664 at the English takeover of New Netherland. It continues to this day in our political institutions and political and civic culture, but unfortunately it is not widely known, because it is not taught in our schools to our children—and therefore it is not widely known, a vicious circle.

What should be done to reverse the deplorable state of ignorance concerning New Netherland, which unfortunately is not limited to this film, but is found in our very textbooks, our very classroom lectures? Might a discussion ensue?