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An Honest Title to American Territory: John Romeyn Brodhead and the Resurrection of Dutch Colonial Past in the 19th Century

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‘An Honest Title to American Territory’:
John Romeyn Brodhead and the Resurrection
of Dutch Colonial Past in the 19th Century

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History
International Relations

by

Janice Van Patten

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to my wonderful daughters Julia Van Patten and Alexandra Van Patten
without their support this document would not exist

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ABSTRACT

The history of the Dutch in New York State is now a rather widely known historical fact; that was not always the case. After extensive research, especially in The Hague, John Romeyn Brodhead found the extent to which the Dutch created and shaped the Island of Manhattan, then known as New Amsterdam. He discovered documents that explicitly detailed the inception of the company town founded by the Dutch East India Company. He also found detailed records of the surrender of the Dutch land holdings in America to the English, which happened in 1664. It was his contention that England had no legal right to interfere with another sovereign nation's possession. Despite his findings, the American public was very reticent to accept this new information and Brodhead would spend the rest of his career as an historian trying to bring these records to the forefront of the public's knowledge.

Keywords: American Colonial History, Dutch in America, John Romeyn Brodhead, New Amsterdam, New York, Nineteenth-Century Historiography

INTRODUCTION

From the 1840s and into the early 1860s, less than one hundred years after the Revolutionary War, John Romeyn Brodhead gave a series of lectures in New York about the unknown history of the Dutch colony that first occupied the Island of Manhattan. He was vilified in the press for even suggesting that there were any other forefathers but the Puritans of New England. *The Newark Daily Advertiser* in December of 1850 said they “found it particularly ludicrous that so great and powerful a country...could have gotten where it had by following the example of the policy of the petty cheese-paring of the Batavian provinces, with their windmills, and barren soil, fit only for fuel.”¹

In fact, Brodhead was proposing an alternate founding history of the American Nation. Ten years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, Henry Hudson, under the employ of the Dutch owned East India Company, found present day New York. Hudson, an Englishman, had been employed by London interests to find the shortest passage to the China Seas. After two unsuccessful attempts and a near mutiny, his English sponsors passed on paying for Henry’s third attempt. The Dutch East India Company was looking for a lucrative venture to replace their diminished Russian pelt trade, so in 1608 they hired Henry Hudson to look again for the Northeast Passage. In 1609, he found the river that bears his name. It is in Holland at this time that the first stock certificate was issued; this provided greater capital and less risk to these maritime ventures. The Dutch East India Company was started in 1602 with the same premise in mind. The company was an amalgamation of many interests that wanted to enjoy the profit of

¹ “Following the Example.” Newark Daily Advertiser, 6 December 1850.

bringing pepper and spices back from India.² It was this early episode of American colonial history that Brodhead wanted to restore to the historical record of America's past.

The *Daily Advertiser* should not have so easily dismissed Brodhead's assertions; he would become the nineteenth century's preeminent historian on New York's colonial history. John Romeyn Brodhead was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on January 2, 1814. He was the second son born to Rev. Jacob Brodhead, a prominent clergyman of the Dutch Reformed Church. He graduated from Rutgers University in 1831 and was admitted to the New York City bar in 1835. Despite his background in law, after 1837, Brodhead focused his academic pursuits and career on the study of American colonial history. The Brodhead family had come from Yorkshire, England and they were direct descendants of a captain in the British Army. Brodhead, himself, was the Secretary of the American Legation at London from 1846 to 1849 and a naval officer of the port of New York from 1853 to 1857. President Franklin Pierce offered him the position of Ambassador to Japan, but he declined. He published several addresses and an academic history of the State of New York. He died in New York on May 6, 1873.³

In order for Brodhead to pursue his interests in history of the early colonization of America he sought, and was granted in 1839, an appointment as attaché of the American legation at The Hague, in the Netherlands. His work attracted the attention of the New York Historical Society, which became interested in finding raw historical material. During this era, it was not uncommon for states and regions to produce their own histories and the production of these histories rose along with the memberships in historical societies. The New York Historical Society had been founded in 1804 for the purpose of documenting the history of New York City

² Barbara Tuchman, *The First Salute*. (Toronto, Canada: Random House, 1988), 27.

³ William Richard Cutter, *Memorial Biographies of the New-England Historic Genealogical Society Vol. VII* (Boston: New England Genealogical Society, 1907), 55.

and State. It was also intended as a forum to examine the issues and debates surrounding the making and meaning of history within contemporary society. Despite concerted efforts, the society suffered under heavy debts until 1809, when it organized a celebration of the 200th anniversary of the arrival of Henry Hudson in New York Harbor. Because of this event's success, the society petitioned for and was granted an endowment from the New York State Legislature to produce a compendium of documents related to New York's colonial history. According to historian George Callcott, such projects stemmed from a new found popular interest in America's past: "Generally instigated and financed by the national and local governments, these ponderous documentary publications were products of the popular demand for history."⁴ (It would suffer under heavy debt again and at times was forced to mortgage some of the holdings of its library.) In 1841, at the Historical Society's urging, then-Governor of New York William H. Seward appointed Brodhead to research and document the archives of England, France and the Netherlands to find new information about early New York State. (Seward was a strong proponent of many progressive political policies, including increased spending on public education.) With Seward's endorsement, the New York State legislature appropriated funds for Brodhead to travel to Europe in search of any documents relating to New York's colonial history, and to find out everything he could about those first colonists.

Brodhead took several years to research, gather, and transcribe material from European archives. E. B. O'Callaghan M.D., LL.D. was hired to accompany him and be the translator for Dutch and French documents Brodhead uncovered. Brodhead returned to New York in August of 1844 with almost eighty manuscripts already translated and compiled. These contained volumes of documents that had not been seen by American historians before. He found a

⁴ Callcott, George H. "Historians in Early Nineteenth-Century America," The New England Quarterly 32, no. 4 (1959): 500.

particularly rich source of material in the Dutch archives in The Hague. Some of the more in-depth documents he found, and those he would cite in support of his arguments about the importance of the Dutch presence in New York, included a bound manuscript found in Amsterdam that contained the writings of Henry Hudson and some of the members of his crew during their voyage under Dutch employment. The letters and journals held at The Hague included several official documents in the form of correspondences related to surrender of New Netherland to the British in 1664. Among some of the more customary business letters between Dutch Governor Peter Stuyvesant and his superiors in Holland are his full account and justification for surrendering the lands of New Netherland. Even the amount of gunpowder in the fort at the time of the English invasion had to be accounted for, to support Stuyvesant's contention that they were lacking in ammunition and men to fight, and that no other viable option except capitulation was available. The transcripts Brodhead found also included many letters from both Stuyvesant and the English commander Colonel Richard Nicolls, to their respective commanders.⁵

Despite the vast array of documents Brodhead found in Holland, his information could have been far more interesting. Unfortunately, in 1821, The Hague, "in a truly unfortunate fit of housekeeping" (in the words of one historian) sold some of the remaining archives of the Dutch East and West India Companies, dated prior to 1700, as scrap paper. Eighty thousand pounds of records were destroyed for the price per pound. Because of discoveries made in New York City sometime in the eighteenth century, we have some early records from the colony itself, containing letters, journals and court records; to date about twelve thousand pages have been discovered, but these begin only after 1638 and had gone through several failed translation

⁵ John Romeyn Brodhead, E.B. O'Callaghan, trans. Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York: Procured in Holland, England, and France, (Albany: Weed, Parsons and Company, 1858), 237.

attempts.⁶ When, exactly, these surviving documents were discovered is unclear, but they first appear in the public record in 1801, when a committee led by Aaron Burr declared that a translation of the records should be undertaken. Despite several ill-fated attempts throughout the early 1800s, including two semi-finished translations that were destroyed by fire, this never comes to fruition, and scholars only began translating these colonial records at the New York State Library in Albany, in the 1970s.⁷

Because of his researches in Europe, John Brodhead became the pre-eminent historical scholar for the brief period of Dutch colonial history in New Amsterdam. He knew more about this particular period in history than any of his contemporaries. With his expertise, in turn, he set about to challenge then-prevailing notions of America's colonial heritage. He suggested that the American people were not solely born from the Puritan forefathers, and offered up a new and alternative model of the nation's origins based on "honest" commercialism rather than the religious freedom pursued by the Puritans or the brutal conquest of indigenous peoples practiced by other European colonial powers. In particular, he defended the Dutch right to the land north of the boundary of Virginia. He argued that the discoveries of this area by the Dutch and the English Patent of 1620 should have secured this area for Holland.

Brodhead initiated a conversation that detailed the neglected history of one of the most influential cities in the world. New York was one of America's greatest achievements. Of the documents he discovered in The Hague, many of them dealt with the rights the employees of the

⁶ Russell Shorto, *The Island at the Center of the World* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 4-5.

⁷One of the most significant contributions to the current overall knowledge of the Dutch influence on early American history is a culmination of the work of Dr. Charles Gehring, director of the New Netherland Project in Albany, New York. Dr. Gehring has spent over thirty five years translating the seventeenth century Dutch records of New Amsterdam, the first European colony on Manhattan. The documents he continues to interpret were found in the vaults of the New York State Library almost two hundred years ago and contain 12,000 sheets of rag paper. For almost two centuries, no one knew what to do with them. Usually made from fabric consisting mainly of cotton or flax. It had much larger fibers than the more modern wood based paper, so it was not unreasonable that documents of this type lasted for centuries.

company expected to enjoy in the New World. These rights were not unlike those enjoyed in Holland and included the expectation of eventual land ownership. Not only could the land rightly be bought from the Indians, but those residents of New Netherland could also expect to buy and sell land. This system included men, known as burghers, who held title to the land as long as they were willing to farm it and, in very broad terms, make it prosper. This dedication to commercial prosperity is a theme Brodhead noted throughout the letters between the New Netherland governor and the States-General in Holland. He quotes a letter from the Dutch West India Company to Peter Stuyvesant in the winter of 1652, for instance, in which the Governor is commanded to “promote commerce.” He is also directed to make sure that “Manhattan prosper, her population increase, and her trade and navigation flourish.”⁸ There is no mention of religion. The notion that such a great city and such a large part of the American historical landscape could have been created and continued to flourish to satisfy a commercial prerogative by people who did not come to seek religious freedom or enlighten mankind was, in the mid-nineteenth century, a controversial one. When Brodhead began to lecture and write a version of America’s colonial past that centered on the obscure Dutch, he directly threatened Anglo-Americans’ self definition as a people. By changing the past, in the view of some, Brodhead was endangering the future. If the country enjoyed the prosperity granted to them by God and secured to them because of their exalted beginning, changing any part of that belief could alter their destiny and produce an uncertain future.

⁸ John Romeyn Brodhead, Oration on the Conquest of the New Netherland/Delivered Before the New York Historical Society, (New York: New York Historical Society, 1864), 17.

BRODHEAD'S SPEECHES IN CONTEXT

In an address before the New York Historical Society on November 20, 1844, Brodhead read a translation of the first New Netherland Charter granted by the States General of Holland in October of 1614.⁹ He then went on to say “New England writers in their zeal to establish a paramount British title to the whole of North America between Virginia and Canada” seem conveniently to overlook the fact that England could not claim land that it did not occupy. It is Brodhead’s assertion that several facets of early colonial history had been misconstrued. He pointed, in particular, to those having to do with the eminent domain of New France and New Netherlands and Henry Hudson’s Dutch sponsorship. He dismissed the assertion of his contemporaries that England had the legal claim of all of North America as “palpable absurdity” and warned against mistaking “prescription” for “possession”. It was Britain’s foreign policy at that time, not to claim possession of any lands that were already occupied by a Christian crown or prince. He argued that the strongest argument the British had for claiming title to the land against the Dutch was “transparent subterfuge.”¹⁰

To his public audiences, in the mid-nineteenth century, John Brodhead may have seemed to be inventing information. He was not telling the story that every student had come to know about the settlement of the American colonies. By the nineteenth-century, most textbooks presented an overly hyperbolic view of American success.¹¹ In the decades after the American

⁹ On October 11, 1614, the States General, the governing body of the Netherlands, granted a charter to several Dutch merchants. This gave their company, the New Netherland Company, exclusive trading rights to the land and waterways that Hudson had discovered.

¹⁰ John Brodhead, *Documents Relative*, 61.

¹¹ Early colonial education was rather narrow in scope. Through most of the eighteenth-century, schoolchildren learned to read using their *New England Primer*, which replaced the more primitive hornbook teachers used for instruction during most of the seventeenth century. The Hornbook was a sheet of paper about 3x4 that was covered in a thin layer of transparent horn tacked onto a paddle shaped piece of wood. It contained the alphabet, the Lord’s Prayer and the benediction. No other major changes in education could be expected for decades. Robert K.

Revolution, one of the most important reasons to study history in school was to reiterate the general knowledge of widely accepted truths. According to education historian George Calcott, in the nineteenth century “It was up to history to reveal and prove such ideals as morality, God, progress, American superiority and democracy-absolute truths which men believed in beyond the shadow of a pragmatic doubt, principles around which they could safely and deliberately arrange the facts of history.”¹²

The information that John Brodhead would discover was unfamiliar to most scholars, much less the average person. Further still, the production of American history through textbooks allowed, and even sometimes encouraged, a lot of known information to be discarded. Juxtaposed with the difficulty of finding, reading and interpreting the primary resources, it is no wonder that the Dutch contributions to early American history would not have been realized by even the most fastidious gentlemen scholars of the time. The seventeenth-century Dutch documents presented problems as well. Knowledge of the Dutch language as it was used in the seventeenth century would have been necessary to translate accurately many of the records Brodhead retrieved.¹³

When John Brodhead began to share his research through public lectures, he was not only bringing new information into the discussion, he also had to fight the regional prejudices that shaped the historical profession. Historians in the early nineteenth century would, in all probability, be from New England. As late as 1860, when New Englanders only comprised ten

Ratzlaff, James B. Schick, “The Early American Republic Revisited/Textbook Perceptions of American History,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 1, no. 2 (Summer, 1981): 108.

¹² George H. Callcott “History Enters the Schools,” *American Quarterly* 11 (Winter, 1959): 478.

¹³ Finding the records was not the only obstacle; the records would have been difficult, but not impossible to translate. This difficulty to translate, even for those relative contemporaries of that history, created a lack of continuity and obscured much of the information of the Dutch contribution. Every generation that did not find the time and resources to decipher the original records found in New York City fortuitously alienated exponentially the next generation from this evidence. Without training it would have been a rather daunting task.

percent of the population, this region produced forty-eight percent of U.S. historians. Half of those were from Massachusetts. Further still, in the mid nineteenth century, the educated population was far outnumbered by those who had very little or no schooling. Less than one percent of Americans were educated beyond high school, but among the historians, seventy percent had at least some college education. The majority of these had attended New England colleges.¹⁴ In the nineteenth century, in turn, much of the colonial history produced in the United States was centered on New England's Puritans.

In addition, Brodhead had to confront the long-standing intellectual ties between the United States and Great Britain. During the colonial era, nearly all of the books available for use in teaching were published in England, and written by English historians. According to historian Robert Connors, "Great Britain traded many goods to her colonies, but scholars were never a notable export, and thus Americans, always culturally subordinate, got used to knowledge arriving on these shores in the form of English books."¹⁵

Also contributory was the reliance on British scholarship (and despite the political break that accompanied American independence) the British and the Americans shared a common language, a common system of weights and measurements and common tastes in consumer goods. Emigration from England to America, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was far greater than that of The Netherlands to America.¹⁶ After the American Revolution, the Dutch, on the other hand, became inclined to insulate themselves and retreated into their own enclaves. The Dutch lost much during the revolution because of their geographical proximity to the fighting and their religious differences from the British. More Dutch Reformed churches were

¹⁴ George H. Callcott, "Historians in Early Nineteenth-Century America," 497.

¹⁵ Robert J. Connors, "Textbooks and the Evolution of the Discipline," College Composition and Communication 37 (May, 1986): 180.

¹⁶ Thomas J. Condon, New York Beginnings/The Commercial Origins of New Netherland, (New York: New York University, 1968), 88.

destroyed during the American Revolution than any other denomination.¹⁷ They continued to speak their own languages, and intermarried primarily with each other and became geographically isolated. Because of this, the Dutch community began to experience a level of bias that they had not been exposed to before. At a time when the United States, as a new nation, was trying to define itself, the Dutch were becoming exiguous.

EARLY AMERICAN HISTORIAN'S VIEW

The earliest historians of the United States had the daunting task of trying to mold a national identity that it could then present to itself and the world. Noah Webster believed that there did exist a national character and that it was the responsibility of the teachers “to help form and preserve that character.” His textbooks of the 1780s, up through those of Emma Willard in the 1850s, agreed on America as a chosen people whose success was favored by fate because of their belief in liberty, morality and equality. The rhetoric of these schoolbooks was patriotism and they set the standard for those that would follow. According to historian J. Merton England, “The words liberty and freedom appear more often perhaps than any other, unless it was their antonyms, tyranny and oppression.”¹⁸ Schoolbooks and history books in early America helped define what it meant to be an American and how that sense of identity could be maintained. This definition was founded on morality and hero worship and confirmed the general belief that the United States was a superior country with a unique place in the world. William Grimshaw in his history textbook of 1826, declared, “There are in the United States more nominal nobility, than

¹⁷ Gerald DeJong, The Dutch in America, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), 118-119.

¹⁸ J. Merton England, “The Democratic Faith in American Schoolbooks, 1783-1860,” American Quarterly, 15 no. 2 part 1 (Summer, 1963): 192.

any country in the world...Every governor is Excellent; every judge, senator, and representative, is Honourable.”¹⁹ America was in its infancy and defining the nation became an overriding theme in the education system.

Early American histories also carried distinct religious overtones. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it would have been difficult to see the difference between the civil and the religious influence of education in the schools. Sermons and schoolbooks had many of the same elements.²⁰ Many early history textbook writers were ministers and believed that God favored the Americans over any that had occupied the continent before. Emma Willard, writing in the 1850s, suggested that God had sent a plague to decimate the Indians so a more “civilized” race could take its place.²¹ The underlying theme in many of these lessons took the form of a warning against Americans, that they could lose their good fortune by not adhering to these strict codes of morality established by the founders. Anyone who did not fit this general description posed a threat to America’s relationship with divine providence.

The Puritans and the Pilgrims did fit America’s historical perception of itself. They came to the New World seeking religious freedom and aiming to right the wrongs of society as they saw them in England. They wanted religious, social and moral reforms and were willing to exile themselves to new lands in order to accomplish these goals. In this interpretation, they possessed the loftiest of goals coupled with the staunchest resolve. They were alone in the wilderness that was colonial America and survived. Because of this compelling view, the Puritans held an exalted place in the work of early professional historians. Brodhead countered this exalted place

¹⁹ William Grimshaw, History of the United States, (Philadelphia: Benjamin Warner, 1826), 193.

²⁰ Edward H. Reisner, and R. Freeman Butts. “History of American Education during the Colonial Period,” Review of Educational Research 6 no. 4 (1936): 357-363.

²¹ Emma Willard, Abridged History of the United States, (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1852), 19.

of the Puritans and Pilgrims by arguing that it was the open commercial markets and cultural tolerance of the Dutch that actually gave New York the impetus to thrive beyond its initial owners.²²

BRODHEAD'S CHALLENGE

By the mid-nineteenth century, the United States had a small but growing collection of gentlemen scholars who aimed to produce scholarly histories of the United States. It was in this group that John Romeyn Brodhead belonged, although he would eventually challenge their interpretations of colonial American history. The historians who wrote this history were not themselves a diverse group. The average historian of the mid-nineteenth century would have been an older man. Many scholars did not publish their first books until after the age of thirty, with a majority not publishing before the age of fifty. Their occupations tended to be that of clergymen, lawyers and former statesmen, but many distinguished historians were printers, editors or librarians. Journalists, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, also produced narrative histories that tended to read like exciting novels, instead of as an academic collection of data. According to George H. Callcott, some of the best historians of the time were men of wealth and leisure, with no real occupation to keep them from their writing.²³

As Brodhead was beginning his foray into historical endeavors, George Bancroft in Boston was publishing his *History of the United States of America, from the discovery of the American Continent*, which first appeared in 1854. He added several more editions and volumes,

²² Reverend Isaac Jogues wrote in about 1643 "No religion is publicly exercised...for there are besides Calvinists, in the colony Catholics, English Puritans, Lutherans, Anabaptists, Muistes etc." Even after the Dutch had lost control of the colony, the citizens wanted this freedom insured. This particular liberty was preserved under the Articles of Transfer to English Authority.

²³ Callcott, "Historians in Early Nineteenth-Century America", 498-499.

completing ten volumes by 1878. The two historians, Bancroft and Brodhead, had somewhat of a shared history themselves: it appears that Brodhead served under Bancroft while they both worked for the American Legation in London. Bancroft was a staunch advocate of secondary education and championed this cause at both the state and federal levels. He would eventually establish the Round Hill School in Northampton, in Massachusetts, considered the first serious foray into elevating secondary education in the United States. In Bancroft's works concerning the colonization of New Netherland, he states that in October of 1627, the Dutch and the Pilgrims have their first encounter: "The Pilgrims, who had English hearts, questioned the title of the Dutch to the banks of the Hudson, and recommended a treaty with the English."²⁴

According to later historians, this was not exactly what happened. In 1625, the Dutch East India Company had the foresight to send three ships to the people employed in their commercial interests in New Amsterdam, laden with horses, cows, sheep and hogs to ensure the survival of their investment.²⁵ This gave the company town opportunities that other, less well-stocked colonies did not enjoy. As early as 1628, the Dutch colony tried to make contact with the Pilgrim colony to the North. They sent a welcoming letter along with sugar and cheeses. According to the letters of William Bradford, governor of the English colony at the time, the Pilgrims sent back a reply that stated, "We must remain your debtors till another time, not having any thing to send you for the present that may be acceptable."²⁶ The English colonies to the north were suffering and would continue to do so until the introduction of tobacco would ensure their survival. It was Brodhead's assertion that the Dutch Colony prospered at this time because

²⁴ George Bancroft, History of the Colonization of the United States Vol. II, (New York: Julius Hart & Company, 1886), 6.

²⁵ DeJong, Dutch in America, 13.

²⁶ William Bradford, Governour Bradford's Letter Book, Vol. 3, 53-54. quoted in I.N. P. Stokes, Iconography of Manhattan Island, 1498-1909, (New York: Robert H. Dodd,), 6.

of its ability to adapt to the environment and their inclusion of people from many different places and religious persuasions. In Brodhead's view, New Amsterdam's status as a company town, with commercial interests at its core, led to its success.²⁷

George Bancroft was one of the first writers of a complete American history. He stressed America as a nation chosen by God, with special responsibilities and blessings. In his interpretation, colonial Americans were unique in their ability to tame the wilderness and establish and cultivate free industries. Bancroft was typical of early American historians in that he married Christian ideals and morals into the historical narrative that elevated America's national purpose. Bancroft's writings were difficult to refute. His combination of romanticism, patriotism, religion and storytelling appealed to American readers. In Bancroft's version of events, America was not only serving the nation's preordained destiny by becoming the dominant force on the American continent, but they were also fulfilling the will of God by actualizing their purpose. According to historians Joyce Appleby and Lynn Hunt, "After the celebration of American grandeur in his best-selling histories, it became increasingly difficult for Americans to accept more modest portrayals of their past."²⁸

Brodhead presented a different view with an entirely different cast of characters. The history he tried to tell was profit-centered rather than rooted in a grand moral design.²⁹ He also brought the account of the early Dutch colony and its rivalry with England into the public domain. As he recounts it in 1640, the Dutch West India Company declared all of New Netherland a free trading zone. In addition to many other foreign countries, they established a

²⁷ John Brodhead, Addresses of John Romeyn Brodhead and Horatio Seymour, Delivered Before the Clinton Hall Association and Mercantile Library Association, (New York: Geo. F. Nesbitt, 1854), 9.

²⁸ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, Telling The Truth About History, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 113.

²⁹ Brodhead, Clinton Hall Speech, 24.

commerce treaty with Virginia, because at that time even most English trade went through Manhattan. During this period, economic historians have estimated that in tobacco shipments alone it cost Britain ten thousand pounds per year.³⁰ England wanted to secure their share of the seafaring trade and ensure that the largess of their colonies would only benefit them; so to counter this loss of commerce, they passed the first Navigation Act in 1651. It stated very clearly that the colonies could only trade with Britain and only in British ships. It began a long-standing English policy that tried to limit Dutch profits and influence. Ultimately, it would do little more than antagonize the American colonies and create a smuggling economy. For the sake of profit, the Dutch were willing to help the Americans find ways around the Navigation Laws. After the enforcement of the Stamp Act, the majority of Americans refused to purchase English tea and began to buy the smuggled tea from Holland. In many cases, they continued to buy this tea, even when they could buy it cheaper from English sources.³¹

The entrepreneurial spirit that Brodhead admired about the Dutch colony of Manhattan manifested itself in many ways that would eventually help the Americans defeat the British. According to historian Barbara Tuchman, the smuggling relationship between the American colonies and the Netherlands would become much more important as the problems between the colonies and England escalated. Because of the Navigation Laws imposed by the British on their colonies, America had very little of its own ammunition and ships and depended heavily on their smuggling partnership with the Dutch. In 1776, the British Ambassador to The Hague, Sir Joseph Yorke, declared the small Caribbean Island of St. Eustatius as “the rendezvous for

³⁰ Tuchman, First Salute, 22.

³¹ Tuchman, First Salute, 10-12.

everything and everybody meant to be clandestinely conveyed to America.”³² Even as the government of the Netherlands in the Hague maintained a strict policy of neutrality in the war between Britain and her colonies, Dutch ships were bringing store loads of ammunition, guns and supplies through their Caribbean Islands and transferring them to the American blockade-runners commissioned by the Continental Congress; all of this was under the guise of a simple yet intricate exchange. The Dutch would land with supplies, usually but not exclusively, on the island of St. Eustatius. They would then sell their cargo to the French who would in turn sell to the Americans. All of this transpired with the French never actually taking physical possession of the cargo. The colonies received what they needed to continue fighting the Revolution, the Dutch made a good profit and the French got to annoy the British while pocketing a service fee.³³

It simply became more cost effective for the English to own the island of Manhattan themselves. According to Brodhead, in 1662, Virginia’s government was ordered to enforce the Navigation Laws and soon after Charles II gave all of New Netherland, which contained a population of about ten thousand people, to his brother the Duke of York. Brodhead discovers letters between the Governor of New Netherland and the States General discussing the boundaries and the respective differences between England and Holland as early as 1659. One such dispatch, dated November 5, 1660 and given the very lengthy title *Deduction, or Brief and clear Account of the situation of New Netherland; who were its first discoveries and settler, and the unseemly and hostile usurpations, by the neighboring English, of the land within the West India Company’s limits* contains the colonies own assertion that given the treaties, customs and the expected international laws of the times, the English should be leaving New Netherland in

³² Tuchman, First Salute, 58.

³³ Tuchman, First Salute, 6.

peace.³⁴ Despite a vast array of eloquent letters and agreements, the Dutch lost the Island to the British on August 28, 1664 in a passive exchange between the two powers. There was no blood shed because the Dutch were outgunned and had very few options except surrender and the British were more than willing to accept that surrender, knowing that destroying the people and buildings on the island would have a direct impact on profitability. The government in London had no intention of evicting the residents of what was, by then, New York.

Whether it was called New Amsterdam or New York, it was too valuable in its commercial and political position, for either side to want to jeopardize its viability with the destruction that war brings. According to historian Joyce Goodfriend the Dutch may have given up New Netherland without a fight, but for an unusually long time, they did not give up those things that made them distinct. Even after conquest by the British, they continued to marry mostly among themselves, spoke the Dutch language and stayed with the traditional Dutch Reformed Church. This did not preclude them from holding office or owning land.³⁵ In the end, it was easier for the English to capture the island than it was to assimilate the people. The Dutch continued to maintain a certain amount of autonomy and the Island of Manhattan would change hands between the British and the Dutch again twice, both times with resignation instead of bloodshed.³⁶

³⁴ Brodhead, Documents Relative, 133.

³⁵ Goodfriend, Joyce. Before the Melting Pot-Society and Culture in Colonial New York City 1664-1730. (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 16.

³⁶ According to New York State records, soon after the Dutch took possession of the island of Manhattan they began plotting out major roads, many of which still exist today. One of the first known drawings of the area show a windmill, which would seem very out of place in modern New York, but much of contemporary Broadway would still be recognizable to the settlers of 1664, when it was then first designated as Long Street. Bridge Street and Stone Street are also currently located where the Dutch mapped them out as early as 1636. The boroughs of Harlem and Long Island owe their names to the first Dutch settlers. They also spread out into the surrounding areas, what they called Fort Orange became present day Albany, the capital of New York State.

In one of his most famous speeches, John Brodhead addressed the members of the Mercantile Library Association, on the occasion of their dedication of a new building in Astor Place. His speech was announced in the *New York Times* on June 8, 1854. Along with other prominent speakers, including the New York Governor Horatio Seymour, who was to give an account of the Association's history, Brodhead was to give a general account of the history of the commercial interests of New York. In a letter dated May 22, 1854, the secretary of the association, Charles E. Milnor, requested Brodhead's presence so that "their past history may receive from your able hand a lasting shape."³⁷ That is apparently exactly what happened, but perhaps not in the vein that was expected.

Brodhead's speech covers about twenty pages and is heavily pro-Dutch. He even spends several paragraphs defending the twenty-four dollars the Dutch paid the Indians for the land, an event he believes is one of the most interesting in New York's history and deserving of commemoration. He calls it an "honest sale" and an "honest bargain". He goes on to disagree with those who think it was thievery on account of the subsequent increase in value of the property. "For, however, some may now be inclined to carp at the inadequacy of consideration when estimating the present value of corner lots" any tax commissioner would consider it an excellent investment. He states that this is one of the most interesting aspects of New York, because the founders of New Amsterdam did not come as conquerors do, but as commercial pioneers. In his words, "If ever Europeans acquired an honest title to American territory, the Batavian settlers of New York surely had it."³⁸

In this speech, Brodhead calls Holland "the fatherland" several times and Amsterdam "their sister city across the Pacific." If his words about the first settlers of Manhattan were not in

³⁷ Brodhead, Clinton Hall Speech, ii.

³⁸ Brodhead, Clinton Hall Speech, 9.

line with the ideals and historical narratives familiar to his audience, his negative words about several British incidents, too, would have surprised them. Among other things, he contends that the Dutch were superior ship builders and the first vessel constructed by Europeans on American soil was built by the Dutch in 1614 and named *The Restless*. He also pointed out that, in 1631, the largest ship ever attempted in America, up to that time, was built and launched from Manhattan to Holland. This merchant frigate was called the *New Netherland* and was one of the most expansive commercial ships of her time. Brodhead also recounted other examples of the commercial prudence of the Dutch. In a truly inspired bit of marketing, in 1658, a group of Dutch merchants in New Amsterdam “availing themselves of a favorable opportunity” send a ship with sugar and tobacco to Quebec. The merchants chose to forgo the remittance of all duties in consideration of the designation of being the first commercial voyage from Manhattan to Canada. Brodhead believed that this “growing greatness of the Dutch province provoked the jealousy of England” and the “hurtful” Navigation Laws were initiated and enforced because of this jealousy.³⁹

Governor Seymour addressed the assemblage after John Brodhead had finished. His speech was to concentrate specifically on the history of the Mercantile Library Association. Instead, he began his speech by talking about the responsibility of every man to educate himself with useful knowledge. He states, “The gentleman who has preceded me has clearly and succinctly narrated some of the striking events of its past history. He might have added many more of an equally honorable character.” In what seems to have been an effort to counter Brodhead’s praise of the Dutch, Seymour continued by saying “when in erecting this edifice for the worship of our God, they designated it ‘The Church of the Puritans,’ to perpetuate the

³⁹ Brodhead, Clinton Hall Speech, 11.

memory of those who established upon the shores of Plymouth Bay, institutions founded upon principles of civil and religious liberty.”⁴⁰ It was Brodhead’s assertion, however, that the appreciation of civil and religious liberty originated with the Dutch. He had explained at length how tolerant of many religions and nations the first colony was. By his estimation, as early as 1643, there were about 800 people living on the island speaking at least thirteen languages. He goes on to say “in the cordial welcome which its earliest Dutch burghers gave to all strangers of every race and creed who desired to settle among them. “They made residence and loyalty the only conditions of citizenship.”⁴¹

Taking into account the Salem witch trials and the general perception of the Puritans as the antithesis of tolerance, Historian Barbara Tuchman puts it succinctly when comparing the Dutch and the Puritans. She discusses how Dutch society “harbored the unorthodox” while in contrast the “American Puritans of New England, whom the experience of real hardship had taught nothing of gentleness toward their fellowman but the reverse, formed in contrast a bigoted and punishing ruling group.”⁴² In this view, they were by contrast, a society of fanaticism and isolation. It was the openness of the Dutch-both culturally and commercially-that Brodhead championed. In his speech, Brodhead credits the Dutch with making New York a commercial triumph: “They came from a land of honest traders, where mercantile faith was the guiding star. They brought with them hither maxims and habits which had made Amsterdam great-which were to make New Amsterdam greater.”⁴³ This argument could not be made for those Pilgrims who

⁴⁰ Brodhead, Clinton Hall Speech, 26.

⁴¹ Brodhead, Clinton Hall Speech, 9.

⁴² Tuchman, The First Salute, 41.

⁴³ Brodhead, Clinton Hall Speech, 8.

had left Amsterdam in 1620, after living there for twelve years, because they believed the “evils” of open-mindedness in Holland were “corrupting” their children.⁴⁴

Brodhead ends his speech with the same illustration that he used to begin it. He quotes the words of advice the colony of New Amsterdam received from the directors of the Dutch West India Company in the winter of 1652. “Promote commerce-must prosper-her trade and navigation flourish. For when the ships of New Netherland ride on every part of the ocean-then numbers now looking to that coast with eager eyes will be allured to embark for you island.” Eventually some of these words would become part of the first coin minted for use in the colony of New Netherland. Brodhead interpreted the words from Holland to Manhattan as more of a prophesy than a directive. He closed his speech by telling the assemblage “Merchants and clerks of New York you have seen that prophecy fulfilled! Men of all races, and tongues, and climes, upon your own rocky island-where Dutch sagacity, liberality, integrity and perseverance laid the foundations....to build up the golden throne of commerce.”⁴⁵

Brodhead devoted the rest of his career as a historian to Dutch colonial history and the injustice he felt was perpetuated against the Dutch by the English in seizing Holland’s lands. As late as 1864, in an oration, again before the New York Historical Society to commemorate the two-hundredth anniversary of the British conquest of New Netherland, he again reminded those in attendance that the British had no legal right to demand possession of New Amsterdam from the Dutch. He stated emphatically “The title to which Holland thus acquired to New Netherland was as just and valid as any of which the history of the world contains a record...According to the English rule, it undoubtedly belonged to the Dutch.” In his lecture, he presented a portion

⁴⁴ Tuchman, The First Salute, 54.

⁴⁵ Brodhead, Clinton Hall Speech, 24.

of the official documents relating to the surrender of the New Netherlands in August of 1664. It contains the response of Peter Stuyvesant's reply to the summons issued by the British to surrender. Stuyvesant complied in order to "prevent the effusion of blood, plundering, murders, and the good of the inhabitants." In Brodhead's opinion this illegal invasion by the British completely contradicted the legal means by which the Dutch came to possess the same land. It would seem an odd speech to be given at a commemoration that the historical society called The Anniversary of the Conquest of New Netherland. By celebrating the conquest by the British and ignoring the loss to the Dutch, the title alone conveyed something of the shadow that remained over the Dutch colonial history in America.⁴⁶

It was Brodhead's contention that the colony of New Netherland had been flourishing. Talking extensively about the educated and ordained clergy who found employment in the colony, along with schoolmasters, he stressed the presence of "civilizing" influences. He even alluded to the fact that there may have been a "hope whispered that the glory of the New Amsterdam might, in time, eclipse the greatness of the old." Brodhead described how the Dutch truly made this their home, fashioned after what they were familiar with in "the Fatherland." On a humorous note, he described the naming of places by saying "Names familiar in the Fatherland replaced, with more affection than good taste, the sonorous and descriptive nomenclature of the aborigines."⁴⁷

In response to the Brodhead's contributions to historical knowledge on the Dutch, which were supported by the extensive documentation he retrieved from European archives, critics found more inventive ways to downplay the importance of the nation's Dutch heritage. In a review of the event in a *New York Times* editorial dated November 10, 1864, the writer reiterated

⁴⁶ Brodhead, Conquest of the New Netherland, 11.

⁴⁷ Brodhead, Conquest of the New Netherland, 15.

Brodhead's narrative, but then made the argument that the loss of New Netherland to the British was the best thing for the greatest amount of people. The writer argued that without this crucial step, America would never have had the opportunity to fight the Revolution and become the nation it was supposed to be. He also surmised that the Dutch inhabitants gladly took the oath of allegiance to England using words like "content" and "acquiescing fully" and he used the phrase "English superiority" throughout. Despite his retroactive justification for British acquisition of New Netherland, the writer also raised the more interesting question of why this information was not always in the forefront of the discussion on American colonial history.

There is no State nor nation which has better reason to be proud of its annals than New-York, yet of no State were the beginnings left for generations in greater obscurity. This is owing to the difficulty of getting at the records, and in a still greater degree to an inherited or imitative deprecation of everything Dutch, which seems to have infected so many writers in our own country, especially those of New -England. It may well be questioned whether their zeal has not run into injustice and whether while incessantly magnifying the praise of one portion of our Union, a candid acknowledgment of the merits of others has not been systematically shunned.⁴⁸

This is one of the first acknowledgments of the validity of Brodhead's information and more importantly a valid questioning of the status quo.

⁴⁸ "Old New-York" New York Times, 10 November, 1864.

BRODHEAD'S LEGACY

In the nineteenth-century before the discussions of diversity and multi-culturalism entered the academy, there was only one history, the history that was taught in schools, memorized, and recited by every child. The standards of science and proof became the way all things were judged, including history. According to historians Appleby and Hunt, "In this transit from poetry and chronicles to social science, historians took on the responsibility of sifting through the facts about past events in search of the underlying logic shaping the course of social development."⁴⁹

In addition to favoring the Dutch as colonial settlers, John Romeyn Brodhead, also brought empiricism to bear on the topic of New York Colonial history, through his rigorous archival work. In the archives, it seems, he was fighting not only the ephemeral, unpredictable life spans of historical documents, but also America's perception of itself. To believe in what he said meant giving up the notion that Americans had a common identity and a shared past. The country clearly did not possess one "ethnic stock", but it was nonetheless comforting and easy for many to assume the shared common social and political origins in the Puritans. According to anthropologist Mary Douglas, "Americans had to invent what Europeans inherited...". She emphasized, in turn, the political and social importance of historical memory. "Any institution that is going to keep its shape, needs to control the memory of its members."⁵⁰ The history that Brodhead told directly conflicted with the guarded American pride of the collective story.

John Brodhead began his career as a historian by finding a specific group in a particular era that significantly influenced America. Even though this was done before it was an accepted approach to American history, his influence may still be felt. Bancroft discussed American

⁴⁹ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, 91.

⁵⁰ Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, 106.

history as if it concerned a homogenous group of people with a common experience and a shared destiny. Brodhead introduced the concept that there were several groups present at the inception of the nation, each with their own goals, ideals and significant culture. The Dutch in his narrative were here for personal economic gain and were willing to accept many others of different backgrounds, as long as they held the same commercial principles.

For the first historians of American history, the history of America began with the Pilgrims and the Puritans and the area of New England that had “always” belonged to the English and their American sons and daughters. The history of New York, in this interpretation, started with the conquest of the region by the English and any claims to it the Dutch proclaimed almost immediately became inconsequential. According to historian Robert Shorto, “When the time came to memorialize national origins, the English Pilgrims and Puritans of New England provided a better national model. The Pilgrims’ story was simpler, less messy, and had fewer pirates and prostitutes to explain away.”⁵¹

One hundred years after Brodhead made his contributions to American history, historians and their publics set out to retrieve the histories of those groups not included in the initial telling of the American experience. Minorities and those unable to leave a written record of their involvement became important to the national chronicle. Today, the trend is to look beyond the obvious and find the subtle. More recently, historians of American history have begun to place the nation’s origins within a broader context, one that includes the role of non-British empires, in the founding of colonial America. According to historian Thomas Bender, our cultural differences can make our history fresh and interesting. Brodhead was what Bender might label “a cosmopolitan,” someone who advocated for history to be studied and written in both transnational and intercultural contexts. “For that to happen, both historiography and the

⁵¹ Shorto, *Island at the Center*, 3.

historian have to restore some sense of strangeness, of unfamiliarity, to the American historical experience.”⁵² If the reaction to Brodhead is any indication, he succeeded.

In many ways, John Romeyn Brodhead has been vindicated. In March 2009, *The New York Times* ran an article touting the celebration of Henry Hudson’s 400th anniversary of discovering New Amsterdam by the Museum of the City of New York. The article not only acknowledges New York’s Dutch beginnings, but also celebrated it: “Today, New York’s diverse population includes more American Indians and more people who identify their ancestry as Dutch than any other big city. And that is precisely the point of the museum’s exhibition: New York is and has always been different from other places in America because it was founded by the Dutch. The writer also quotes the chief curator of the museum, Sarah Henry, “Nobody was celebrating tolerance, but the Dutch had a pragmatic approach to diversity.” Henry said the exhibit, in turn, is “intended to provide a portal to a past that is unfamiliar to many.”⁵³ Brodhead spent a great deal of his professional historical career disseminating the Dutch origins of New York. He may have finally found a willing audience.

⁵² Thomas Bender, *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 11.

⁵³ Sam Roberts, “Celebrating 400th Anniversary of Henry Hudson’s Historic Voyage,” *The New York Times*, 29 March 2009.

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