

**Amsterdam-New York:  
Parallels and Reversals in Their 350-Year History**

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Published in George Harinck and Hans Krabbendam, eds., *Amsterdam-New York: Transatlantic Relations and Urban Identities Since 1653* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2005), 9-15.

In 1890 a young author and budding politician, who had just published his first volume of the *Winning of the West* and had made an unsuccessful bid to be mayor of New York four years earlier, produced a history of the city of New York as part of a series on (Anglo) historic towns. This was Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) who had yet to become the greatest American of his age. As most nineteenth-century genteel historians who romanticized the city's early history as a haven for the upper and middle classes, he also drew a lesson from the past: "that he among us who wishes to win honor in our life, and to play his part honestly and manfully, must be indeed an American in spirit and purpose, in heart and thought and deed." As his patrician peers had done, he encouraged the masses of new immigrants to quickly assimilate, as the Dutch settlers had done on Manhattan in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Though he came to represent Mr. America, a visitor later in life described his physical appearance as "some conservative banker of Amsterdam..."<sup>1</sup> Roosevelt did not shy away from addressing the faults of the city—as civil service commissioner, he was keenly aware of corruption and mismanagement—but he extolled its virtues and expressed his deep respect for his home town, emphasizing the humble origins of "a little Dutch trading-hamlet" which its inhabitants had transformed into a "huge American city." To him one of the key features of the city was the easy mingling of Dutch, English and other nationalities, a model for his own time of massive immigration. The mother city of Amsterdam played no part in his narrative, because he was mainly interested in the American identity and was convinced that the interests of the American citizens had been ignored and damaged by the stingy Dutch and the treacherous English in Europe. But without old Amsterdam, the new one would not have come into existence.

The official bond between the two cities began on 2 February 1653, when Nieuw Amsterdam installed its first court on Manhattan Island. This court was granted by the commercial authorities of 'old' Amsterdam and marked the beginning of Nieuw Amsterdam as a separate community. From that date on a tale of two cities can be told. Thanks to the durable commercial networks and the close ecclesiastical ties the exchange between the two cities continued long after the turnover of 1664. While the colonial history of Nieuw Amsterdam received attention, most of it was devoted to the West India Company. Only a few historians were interested in the relationship between the two cities, while the continued connections between Amsterdam and Nieuw Amsterdam were fully ignored after the latter had become New York in 1664.

The essays in this volume show how the position of the two cities was gradually reversed. Until the early 1800s Amsterdam was the dominant factor: overshadowing New York in size, prestige, wealth, and power. The shift can be located in the 1830s. Massive immigration boosted New York, while Amsterdam's population stalled and declined after 1750. By 1835 New York surpassed Amsterdam in size.

Table 1: Population Size of Amsterdam and New York, 1400-2000<sup>2</sup>

	Amsterdam	New York	Metropolitan area
1400	5,000	--	--
1600	30,000	--	--
1650	200,000	2,000	2,000

1700	220,000	5,000	10,000
1750	210,000	13,000	25,000
1800	200,000	60,000	80,000
1850	230,000	515,000	700,000
1900	500,000	1,850,000	3,440,000
1950	840,000	1,960,000	7,900,000
2000	740,000	1,537,000	8,000,000

The parallels between the cities are numerous. Both cities were commercial centers with strong maritime traditions, both citizenries were strong cosmopolitan communities from an early date on, financial centers, hotbeds for artistic and academic innovation, battlegrounds of religious and political influence, and offered windows to the wider world. However, the center of gravity changed from the old to the new world. Since the 1960s their special relationship resurfaces when New York and Amsterdam function as icons of the modern world, in which history shapes identity. Amsterdam and New York derive their identity not only from their own local history, but they also attune it to each other. Each city pretends to be unique as a warehouse of the world.

This collection of essays deals mainly with the political, commercial, and intellectual relationship of the cities. It does not deal with a comparison of the cities as ports and immigrant destinations or with the arts, which deserve separate treatment, but it does examine the historical identity of both cities.

#### *Identity Politics and a Recognized Date*

In 2003 the “New York City 350th Anniversary Committee” proclaimed February 2nd as the day of the incorporation of the town, a date worthwhile to remember as a proper local birthday with national reverberations because of its multicultural legacy.<sup>3</sup> The organizers had invited author Russell Shorto to the 2004 celebration to portray a Dutch Manhattan as the early American embodiment of an open society rooted in free trade. Shorto concluded “February 2, 1653, New York City’s birthday as Nieuw Amsterdam, is one of the most important dates in American history and leads directly to the Declaration of Independence in 1776”.

A century earlier Robert B. Roosevelt, former American minister to the Netherlands, founding member of the Holland Society and uncle to President Theodore Roosevelt, used the commemorative year to scold New York for its submission to the corrupt bosses in Albany. He placed the antecedents of the Dutch heritage to claim the city’s “birthright of independence and self-reliance.”<sup>4</sup> However, the historical significance was lost to a larger audience. The celebration of New York’s world fair “The Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations” which opened on July 15, 1853 in the Crystal Palace, put the bicentennial of the Nieuw Amsterdam charter in the shade. The Dutch were represented with pieces of art and industrial products at the fair, but they did not utilize the historic year. The only memorable contribution that year was the publication of the first volume of John Romeyn Brodhead’s *The History of the State of New York*, covering the colonial years of the city. This publication was a result of the commission which Brodhead received from the state of New York to collect documents from European archives dealing with the history of New York. Old Amsterdam was a reality for Brodhead. This son of a Dutch Reformed minister joined his uncle Harmanus Bleecker as his secretary in 1839 when the latter became the American chargé d’affaires in the Hague, but this exploration of the historical cords did not trigger a revival of the urban relationship. The New York elites of the nineteenth century were not interested in Amsterdam as a point of reference to the development of their city, nor were Amsterdammers concerned with New York. Only recently has Nieuw Amsterdam grown into a motto for modern New York, as part of a longer tradition.

In recent years Nieuw Amsterdam has captivated the historical imagination for fiction. Maan Meyers, the author duo Martin and Annette Meyers, have published in the 1990s a mystery series set in historical New York. Starting with *The Dutchman*, set in Nieuw Amsterdam in 1664, the story follows Pieter Tonneman, the last Dutch sheriff of Nieuw Amsterdam and the first sheriff of New York and his descendents. A scholarly biography by Donna Merwick, *Death of a Notary: Conquest and Change in Colonial New York* deals with Adriaen Janse van Ilpendam of Beverwijck/Albany, who lived in Nieuw Amsterdam for several

years. Beverly Swerling published in 2001 *City of Dreams: A Novel of Nieuw Amsterdam and Early Manhattan*.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from offering exotic sceneries and excuses for celebrations, the Dutch presence in North America is an uphill battle against academic neglect, lack of language skills, and Anglo dominance. In a review of Benjamin Schmidt, *Innocence Abroad: The Dutch Imagination and the New World, 1570-1670*, Peter C. Mancall claims: "With the exception of a small group of specialists who have studied New Netherland, American historians have not examined Dutch history in much depth."<sup>6</sup> The small band of scholars affiliated with the New Netherland Project has generated a growing body of literature on the Dutch presence. One of the recent products is Janny Venema's *Beverwijck: A Dutch Village on the American Frontier, 1652-1664*.<sup>7</sup> Following the leads of others her study confirms the Dutch identity, visible in civil organization, church and social arrangements in Beverwijck/Albany. The greatest service rendered to the Dutch heritage in New York was the publication of Russell Shorto's *The Island at the Center of the World The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan, the Forgotten Colony that Shaped America*, which quickly appeared in a Dutch translation.<sup>8</sup>

### *Old World Order for the New World*

Fortunately, not only American and Dutch scholars, but also British and German historians are interested in the American Dutch colony as part of the Atlantic community. Together they prevent a chauvinistic treatment of the subject, as presented in this volume.

Jaap Jacobs explains that despite the limited innovations, Nieuw Amsterdam passed a threshold in the year 1653. The city benefited in two ways: the 1653 arrangements clarified the relationship between the inhabitants and the authorities which helped to diminish the sources of conflict between the two sides. Secondly, the charter recognized Nieuw Amsterdam as the capital of the colony, which prepared its role for future growth. Its subsequent development to greater independence was not so much an 'American' desire for freedom, but a natural order which young cities in Europe followed.

Boudewijn Bakker argued that the self-government of Nieuw Amsterdam was almost inevitable, given the fact that Amsterdam and the elites in other Dutch cities in the seventeenth century did not dream of a large empire. Their ideal was a peaceful world, filled by nations that gained wealth, status, and power by the fruits of free trade, protected by an occasional war. Not surprisingly it was the Amsterdam Chamber of the West India Company that was responsible for the state of affairs in the colony.

Simon Middleton cut several specific ties between old and new Amsterdam, since often references to Amsterdam precedents were made by people with no actual connection to Holland's capital. Rulers and ruled worked together to create a society that was familiar to live in. They grew attached to the world they had created and were willing to defend it against disturbing regulations. This interpretation harmonizes two conflicting views of the Dutch legacy, one of which claims its tenacity under English rule, while the other emphasizes the ethnic variety of the citizens. The different groups justified their plans by referring to an enduring and idealized Dutch way of operating. This common point of reference tied the heterogeneous community closer together.

Claudia Schnurmann broadens Middleton's thesis to include Anglo-Dutch relations in and around seventeenth-century Nieuw Amsterdam/New York, since the city took into account American as well as European constellations. Their operations were not hindered by national boundaries, regulations, or ethnicity. The British colonies used their Dutch neighbors to their own advantage usually detrimental to Britain, which explains the hostility of the British authorities against the Dutch colony. Her reconstruction of colonial relations questions the usefulness of traditional national(ist) perspectives on history.

### *Religious Ties, Tolerance, and Independence*

Joyce Goodfriend explored religious pluralism in the transition from Dutch to British rule. She asserts that ethnic diversity in Nieuw Amsterdam did not automatically lead to religious pluralism. As in Old Amsterdam, the Reformed Church was privileged and dominant, though liberty of conscience allowed other faiths to operate in the margin. In fact Stuyvesant wanted to minimize religious diversity and was whistled back by the Amsterdam authorities. The transfer of power to the British actually extended

religious freedom to include Anglicans (of course), but also Lutherans, Quakers, and (temporarily) Catholics, not completely surprising during the reign of a Catholic governor. The subsequent Catholic-Protestant strife in the Old World led to restrictions in the new. Jews had to wait longer for equal treatment. In fact the state constitution of 1777 endorsed religious freedom.

Dirk Mouw zoomed in on the changes in the Dutch Reformed ministry in the same period. He discovered that the Reformed Protestant Dutch congregations called ministers who differed from the candidates selected by the Classis of Amsterdam. New means to recruit ministers resulted in a pietist impetus. This desire for more variety put pressure on the mother church for more local control. However, this did not mean that the relationship between new world and old world Reformed was characterized by opposition. The New York Dutch Reformed maintained their loyalty to the Dordt church order and practices and continued to receive support from the Classis of Amsterdam.

Robin A. Leaver supports Mouw's conclusion of maintaining Dutch practices in the New World by concentrating on the practice of singing, which was done in Dutch till the end of the eighteenth century. He presents evidence for the longevity of the Dathenus psalter. As in the Netherlands, the Dutch in the new world presented alternative rhymes and tunes. Only in 1763 did the first English-speaking Reformed dominee arrive in New York City, an event which coincided with the call for English psalms. The modernization of psalm singing in the Netherlands after the acceptance of the new psalter in 1773 came too late for the American believers to gain ground. The dominant place of the Dathenus version, at that time two centuries old, was a clear sign of the Dutch tongue becoming archaic.

### *Goods and Images*

Hymn books, bibles, devotional publications, and religious treatises formed the majority of the books imported from the Netherlands. Marika Keblusek made a detailed investigation of the book trade from Amsterdam and Leiden to New York. The market for Dutch books in the New World was small and the need was filled via private channels. The main commercial activity was the trade in antiquarian books, which was part of the growth of intellectual life in the young American Republic. James Eastburn's business with the Leiden Luchtmans firm via his Amsterdam agent was part of the growing market for scholarly works, in which the Dutch participated. However, despite the importance of this trade for the intellectual bildung of America, it also strengthened the focus on the past, not on the future.

Among the antiquarian books shipped by Amsterdam and Leiden book traders to New York were the sources that Washington Irving used for his Knickerbocker's history of New Netherland, as Elisabeth P. Funk's research shows. This book was the target of much scorn among the Dutch New Yorkers, but was much more than cheap fun at the Dutch expense. The book was both a register of the strong presence of Dutch folklore in New York and a critical commentary of Irving's early nineteenth-century New York. Moreover, the book inspired generations of historians to search for the real Dutch life in New York.

Trees and the shade they cast was one of the influences of Amsterdam on the physical environment of New York, as Henry Lawrence demonstrates in his essay comparing urban green spaces in both cities. The Amsterdammers practice of planting trees along the streets and canals in the seventeenth century was adopted in New York. In contrast to the planned planting in Amsterdam, New York authorities did not guide the process, but left it to the initiatives of its citizens. During the subsequent eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the two cities diverged till at the end of the nineteenth century both became part of a cosmopolitan trend on both continents to use tree-lined streets and large public parks to ornament the cities and make them more attractive for their inhabitants and for visitors.

When the United States became independent, the Dutch Republic started official diplomatic relations with its sister Republic. The commercial interests were delegated to the consuls, which allowed the two cities to be closer connected. However, despite the important role of commerce and diplomacy, Hans Krabbendam demonstrates that the cities did not develop a special relationship. During the nineteenth century Amsterdam maintained its grip on the New York consulate. In New York similar commercial interests soon gave way to political agendas, making the Amsterdam consulate a desirable reward for political services. After the turn of the century both services were professionalized, which removed the last mutual local connections and revealed the growing dominance of American shipping in the

transatlantic trade of Amsterdam. The consular relations in both cities contributed to the integration of the economic and political sectors, but the original local connections were replaced by national relations. Part of the consuls' duties was to take care of the citizens in the host country. This task increased with the arrival of American tourists in the Netherlands. George Harinck investigated the expectations of the American travelers who flooded into the Netherlands around the turn of the century. The cause of the sudden popularity of Amsterdam and Holland was that its archaic structure allowed the modernized American to escape to an open air museum, which must have resembled New York's origins. Journalist Tracy Metz brings the argument full circle. In her tour of the cities in search of urban identity and historical architecture, she notes the differences between contemporary New York and Amsterdam in dealing with the past, and the similarities in their coping with the question of authenticity.

### *Conclusion*

How should the relationship between the two cities be characterized? In fact, it was not the cities themselves that had a relationship. In the seventeenth century it was the intertwined political and commercial elites, while in the eighteenth century religious ties proved strong, due to the central position of the Amsterdam classis. In the nineteenth century the balance shifted to New York. Five conclusions can be drawn from these essays on the relationship between the cities. The first conclusion is that New Netherland was not a colony of the Dutch Republic. The civil administration of Nieuw Amsterdam took shape in 1653 as part of a continuous process of delegating civil authority conforming with the model of urban development that took place in the low countries since the late Middle Ages. Secondly, the continuity of the Dutch commercial network greatly enhanced the independent position of New York City. Thirdly, the pluriform religious constellation of New York City in the eighteenth century originated in the immigration of a variety of religious groups, which had settled there during Dutch control in the previous century. Fourthly, the relative late interest of the New Yorkers for their Amsterdam roots in the nineteenth century served political purposes: to provide the established Dutch-Americans with a higher status compared to recent immigrants and to press for political agendas separate from the Albany bosses. Finally, the mythological status of Amsterdam contributed more to its reputation as 'founding mother' of New York City than actual exchanges between both cities.

Comparisons between the cities are not only interesting for the past. Current problems which plague Western cities encourage comparisons and the exchange of potential solutions. New York social geographer John Mollenkopf compared the fate of the immigrants in Amsterdam with the developments in New York.<sup>9</sup> He argued that the two cities make a suitable pair for comparison, since their economic pasts contain similar ingredients, such as their port and financial facilities, their magnetic attraction for the young and upcoming generations, their heavy regulation of housing, strong presence of civil servants and social services, and their large immigrant populations, forcing changes on existing neighborhoods. Other urban issues, such as disaster management and security, brought delegations from the Amsterdam city council to visit New York to learn lessons.<sup>10</sup> There are abundant reasons to expect that the longstanding relationship between Amsterdam and New York will endure.

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Street, "Roosevelt, Citizen of New York", *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt* 20 vols. (National edition), vol. 10: 360. Preface, p. 362. Clifton Hood, "Journeying to 'Old New York': Elite New Yorkers and Their Invention of an Idealized City History in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries", *Journal of Urban History* 28 (September 2002): 699-719.

<sup>2</sup> Sources: Dienst Ruimtelijke Ordening Amsterdam, and Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *Encyclopedia of New York City* (New York 1995), 920-923. New York, is basically Manhattan, and figures for the metropolitan area are inclusive of Manhattan.

<sup>3</sup> *New York Sun*, 23 January 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Robert B. Roosevelt, "The Oldest Charter of New York," Theodore M. Banta, ed., *Yearbook of the Holland Society of New York* (1903), 234.

<sup>5</sup> (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

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<sup>6</sup> "Amsterdam's America," *Reviews in American History* 31 (2003): 14-23. Benjamin Schmidt, *Innocence Abroad: The Dutch Imagination and the New World, 1570-1670* (New York 2001)

<sup>7</sup> (Hilversum: Verloren, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> John Mollenkopf, "Assimilating Immigrants in Amsterdam: A Perspective from New York," *The Netherlands Journal of Social Sciences* 30.2 (2000): 126-145.

<sup>10</sup> *De Volkskrant*, 30 september 2004.