

The Dutch are Missing in the American Curriculum

Ann Claunch

The Dutch are missing! Look in any U.S. history textbook. Look under the content standards. Look around the nationally endorsed curriculum—you won't find them. Outside of New York State history classes, there is almost no mention of the Dutch influence in early seventeenth-century America. Fleeting references to the Netherlands as a staging area for the Pilgrims' famous *Mayflower* voyage or the voyage of Henry Hudson are common; however, it is difficult to find anything but a cursory mention of the Dutch influence in America.

A survey of 100 high school students bears this out. I spent a day within the classroom walls of my husband's high school history class and posed the question, "Which countries were involved in the settlement of North America in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries?" Student answers included Spain, England, and France. No Dutch.

Therefore, I asked myself, "Why are the Dutch AWOL in American History?" The answer for most teachers is time. It is difficult to find any more room in an already overflowing curriculum cup. As a former teacher, I can understand the problem of finding time within the curriculum to include the Dutch when examining colonial America. As a historian, however, I do not agree that the 55-year period (1609–1664) that the New Netherlands was under the Dutch flag was too brief to warrant finding time in the classroom. Historical significance is not a matter of longevity; it is a matter of legacy—and the Dutch contribution to our fundamental beliefs about acceptance and tolerance, our economic system, and the overall fabric of American culture was highly significant.

The Dutch Legacy

The Dutch believed strongly in tolerance and, especially, religious freedom. Every student learns that the Pilgrims came to America to be free to practice their own religion—but Pilgrim belief in religious freedom applied only to those who believed as they did. However, the official Dutch policy toward religious freedom was grounded in tolerance for all faiths. After the Netherlands gained independence from Spain and were liberated from the oppressive atmosphere of the Inquisition, its government decreed: "Each person shall remain free, especially in religion, and that no one should be persecuted or investigated because of their religion."¹ A statement delivered by a Dutch official during this time captured the belief of the nation: "Strength of the state did not derive its strength from a single faith but from citizens' freedom to worship at their will and intellectual inquiry."²

They brought this notion of tolerance with them to the New Netherlands, and practiced it even after the Dutch settlements fell under British rule. By the 1690s, 30 churches representing five dif-

ferent religions were established in New York City: The Church of England, the Dutch Calvinists, the French Calvinists, the Dutch Lutherans, and the Roman Catholics. Religious tolerance was infused into the American culture, appearing a century later in the U.S. Constitution as religious freedom.

The Dutch legacy is also evident in the Melting Pot aspect of American society. From the beginning, the Dutch welcomed immigrants from all parts of Europe into the New Netherlands, forming the first truly multi-cultural society on American soil. In fact, the New Netherlands was the beginning of the first mixed society. Marriage certificates passed on to the British in 1664 evidenced the diversity of the blend of nations within matrimony.

Standing as a symbol of the Dutch economic legacy is New York harbor, the fundamentals of free trade, and the stock market. The Dutch believed strongly in unrestricted trade and an open port. The first corporate conglomerates began with the Dutch East India Company, which contributed the antecedents of today's stock market.

These issues of trade and corporations, religious freedom, and a tolerant and multicultural society formed an important foundation for the development of America—economically, socially, and culturally. Leaving the Dutch out of the American history curriculum denies students the opportunity to examine the complex nature of colonial America and

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2. The "Half Moon" in New York Harbor.
Copyright, 1909, by Stereo-Travel Co.

the contributions of all who came here to build a new nation.

Useful Resources

This year marks the 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson's voyage in 1609 and the founding of Dutch Manhattan and the New Netherlands; and it is time we rediscover the Dutch in the social studies curriculum. Fortunately, there are many newly published resources for teachers and students. The following are three books for the bookshelf of every history teacher interested in a "Dutch Revival."

The Dutch as a World Power

Brooks, Timothy. *Vermeer's Hat: The Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008.

Brooks offers readers invaluable

historical insight into the Dutch trade empire of the seventeenth century through six famous paintings of Dutch painter Johannes Vermeer. A historian, Brooks challenges readers to look beyond Vermeer's art to evoke a mental map of the world trade routes of the seventeenth century behind each depicted household item. With the author's guidance, readers look beyond the felt hat and the china teapot in *Officer and the Laughing Girl* to envision the trade routes from North America that transported the under fur of the beaver to the European millinery and the trade route from China that delivered the teapot to the Dutch table. A closer study of the painting also shows the disturbing side of trade: silver mined from the exploited Native Americans of South America and an enslaved African child attending to his Dutch mistress.

Even as the Dutch were involved in the slave trade, *Vermeer's Hat* chronicles events which embedded the mores of tolerance and acceptance in the Dutch culture—exhibited on the ships, rooted in the attitudes of Dutch settlers to New Amsterdam, and that became a legacy in American history. After a century under Spanish rule, the Netherlands gained independence in the late sixteenth century and declared a "strenuous spirit of opposition to a sovereign concentrated in one head." In direct opposition to the religious intolerance, the Dutch adopted tolerance and openness to new ideas. This belief in tolerance drew the greatest thinkers and those seeking religious freedom to the Netherlands during this time: Rene Descartes, John Locke, the Walloons, and the Pilgrims.

The race for world dominance of the trade routes chronicled in this book draws readers in deeper. With their newfound independence, the Dutch began to build a trade empire throughout the Far East, Africa, and South America. The Netherlands joined Spain, England, and Portugal in competition for dominance over trade and world power. Ships crisscrossed the globe at breakneck speed to cement old and to develop new trade routes to the Far East. Each country vied to become the world leader in the trade of spices, pelts, china, tobacco, silk, gunpowder, opium, silver, and slaves. New technologies, such as the magnetic compass and gunpowder, supported this restlessness of global travel. *Vermeer's Hat* is an excellent resource for bringing this seventeenth-century world of "perpetual motion" alive for students.

Teaching Suggestions

After presenting information about the trade routes and examining Johannes Vermeer's paintings for trade items, assign students to research consumerism during this period. How supply and demand define the trade routes and encourage conflicts or alliances between nations. If teachers would like to develop lessons utilizing the paint-

ings, all can be accessed online at www.essentialvermeer.com.

Henry Hudson and the Dutch

Goodman, Joan Elizabeth. *Beyond the Sea of Ice: The Voyages of Henry Hudson*. Ontario: Firefly Books, Ltd., 1999.

Henry Hudson was of historical significance in the Dutch story of early America. As the world competition increased in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the world's eyes turned toward the west to find new trade routes to the Orient. The British were the first to hire Henry Hudson, a renowned explorer of the time, who was determined to find a "Northwest Passage," a new route to Asia through the Arctic Circle above Russia. The British decided to cut their losses after early failures, terminating Hudson's employment. The Dutch, however, recognized Hudson's experience and daring, and hired him. The Dutch also knew of his propensity for not following orders. Before embarking on the venture of the third voyage around the Arctic under the Dutch flag, a written warning was issued to Hudson "to think of discovering no other routes or passages," and to head east toward Russia. A maverick by nature, Hudson was intent on finding the Northwest Passage and purposefully veered 3,000 miles off course after a cursory attempt to sail around Russia, and set a course for North America.

Goodman presents a realistic story—supported by journal entries from the voyages—of the hardships of exploring in the early 1600s. Henry Hudson is portrayed as obsessed, single-minded, and an unrelenting believer who did not consider the danger to or from his crew in each of his voyages. After reading Goodman's book, from first person accounts of the dangers of storms, being soaked and freezing in wet wool, fearing starvation and cutting hands on ice frozen to ropes, the reader begins to understand how mutinies could occur. As a picture book, this book is ideal for "unseasoned" readers or English language learners.

Like most explorers, Henry Hudson's original exploration assignment became much less important than what he actu-



Courtesy of New York State Library: Septentrionalium tererum: Mercator, Gerhard, 1512-1594

ally discovered. In 1609, two years after the settlement of Jamestown and a decade before the Pilgrims, Henry Hudson landed on the island of Manhattan, sailing under the Dutch flag, and laying claim to the island and surrounding area for the Dutch.

Sandwiched between the French in the north and the English to the south, this new land extended roughly from present-day Albany to the Delaware Bay, comprising all, or parts, of what became New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.

Teaching Suggestions:

(Map activity adapted from the *National Archives*) Studying the Dutch provides opportunities for students to examine historical maps. Early maps of the North American continent, such as the one Henry Hudson followed, appear to have a Northwest Passage.

Ask students to analyze the map through a series of questions:

A. What type of map is this?

- bird's eye view?

- political map?
- topographical map?

B. What type of information on the map helps us to understand the map?

- Is it signed?
- Is there a date?
- Is the map labeled in any way?
- How do you know what some of the features are if they are unlabeled?

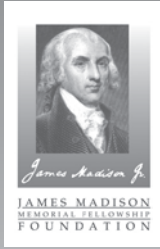
C. Why was this map drawn?

- evidence on the map that supports why this map was drawn?

D. What do you think is important about this map?

E. Who might have used this map and for what purpose?

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THE DUTCH ARE MISSING

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The First Dutch Settlement

Shorto, Russell. *The Island at the Center of the World*. New York: Random House, 2005.

The rich story of the early Dutch settlement is just now emerging, thanks to the work of Dr. Charles Gehring of the New Netherlands Project. Shorto explains in his prologue that because of the difficulty in translating seventeenth-century Dutch, only political documents found their way into the historical record. The living history—"the letters and journals and court cases about marital strife, business failures, cutlass fights, traders loading sloops with tobacco and furs, neighbors stealing each others' pigs—in short, without the stuff from which social history is written, this veneer of political documentation only reinforces the image of the colony as wobbly and inconsequential."³ Shorto's book outlines in detail the development of early New York history. He explores changes in how the Dutch treated Native Americans—at first as equals and business partners and then through imperfect leadership and poor decisions—and how the partnership fell into exploitation.

If the rallying cry of Jamestown was for "God, Glory, and Gold," conversely the rallying cry for the Dutch trading outpost in New York was more focused,

"For Trade, Guilder, and Business!"

Teaching Suggestion

Assign students to research how the Dutch established relationships with different Native groups and how the interactions evolved. Students can answer such questions as:

- *What underlying assumptions did the Dutch have about Native Americans and what was the evidence of the assumptions?*
- *How did the established rules by the Dutch West India Company for engagement with the Native Americans enhance or inhibit the interactions?*
- *What were the factors that led to conflict or collaboration between the two cultures?*
- *How did New Netherland differ from Jamestown?* 🌐

Notes

1. Russell Shorto, *The Island at the Center of the World* (New York: Random House, 2005).
2. Ibid, 29.
3. Ibid, 6.

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