

LOST: Focus on New Netherland

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"(Peter) Minuit bought the island (of Manhattan) for \$24 and (Petrus) Stuyvesant had a wooden leg, then you're on to the (American) Revolution, and that was basically it," Gehring says. "Now we can tell a much more interesting story."

That story is told, in part, in the documentary "Uncovering America's Forgotten Colony: The New Netherland Project," which airs 7:30 p.m. Saturday on WNYT Ch. 13. The half-hour documentary, also available in a longer DVD version, is concise introduction to a world Gehring has been working to reveal since 1974, when he was hired by the State Library to be the translator and editor of Dutch documents related to state history.

At the heart of those documents are the remains of 48 leather-bound volumes seized by the British when they took Fort Amsterdam 345 years ago. The books contain deeds, wills, minutes of meetings, petitions, contacts and correspondence: "the handwritten autobiography of America's first multicultural society," as the documentary puts it.

Gehring, who was teaching German and linguistics at the University at Albany when he was hired to translate for the State Library, was ideally suited for the job of making intelligible the records written in old Dutch, which is as removed from contemporary Dutch as Shakespearean English is from us today. The title of his doctoral thesis was "The Dutch



Language in Colonial New York."

"The idea (of the documentary) was to show people the documents themselves, the damage done to them and the problem we have in translating them," says Gehring. In some cases, words are missing where autograph hunters from a century or more ago excised a signature from Minuit or Stuyvesant; in others, significant chunks of the documents are missing or damaged from a 1911 fire at the state Capitol, which used to house the records; and in almost all cases significant historical detective work must be done to determine the meaning or significance of old words, contexts or names.

"Sometimes we spend days trying to figure out one word," says Gehring.

The documentary is one of four large public-education components undertaken by the New Netherland Institute in observance of the quadricentennial of Hudson's voyage. The institute is the support wing of the New Netherland Project, as Gehring and his staff's translation efforts have been called since 1987. To date the project has translated 65 percent of the 12,000 pages of Dutch documents held in state archives, and 18 volumes of the "New Netherland Documents Series" have been published. (When complete, the series will total 24

volumes.)

In addition to the documentary, the other institute efforts for the Hudson 400 celebrations are a book of essays titled "Explorers, Fortunes and Love Letters: A Window on New Netherland," now in its second printing; a traveling museum exhibit, "Light on New Netherland"; and a show at the Museum of the City of New York called "Amsterdam/New Amsterdam: The Worlds of Henry Hudson." The four pieces cost about \$400,000 total, funds raised by private contributions from individuals, corporations and foundations, according to James Sefcik, development officer for the New Netherland Institute.

"Being this close to history was quite a thrill," says Paul Rutherford, whose Latham-based movie company, Mogul One Production, produced the documentary; Rutherford also co-wrote the film, with Dan Lynch, a former Times Union editor and columnist.

"It's also a big tribute to (Gehring)," says Rutherford. "He's done a lot of amazing work that deserves as much recognition as it can get."

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