

Remarks on the History of Hudson County in Relation to Old Bergen Church and its Community

Presented by Bob Murgittroyd (historian) during the program "Slice of History" (part of Old Bergen Church's 350th Anniversary celebration) on May 14, 2010 at the Brennan Courthouse, Jersey City, NJ

Settlement of Bergen

Tonight's allotted time does not permit a lengthy re-telling of the history of our area but I have been asked to offer glimpses of the history of Hudson County during the 350 years of its existence.

Today it is hard to imagine Hudson County as the edge of the American frontier, but from the time Henry Hudson sailed into the New York Bay in 1609 until the founding of the Town of Bergen in 1660, that is exactly what it was. During those 51 years settlers to the area experienced both the rewards and perils of living in a wildness area filled with rich natural resources and a native people whose cultural would often clash with their own.

Almost immediately upon Hudson's return to the Netherlands the prosperous merchants who had financed his voyage of discovery sought to exploit their investment in the area then named New Amsterdam. One commodity found by Hudson's travels seemed to offer the best chance for immediate financial reward, the pelts of American beaver which were then so highly prized in Europe.

For the next twelve years parties of men were sent to the area to establish small trading posts to barter with the natives for the valuable beaver skins. In 1621 a decision was made to expand the settlement of New Amsterdam and a charter was granted to the Dutch West India Company for exclusive jurisdiction over the area. In the spring of 1623 a ship was outfitted with 30 families to establish a permanent settlement on the tip of Manhattan Island.

A failed attempt to settle the area of Hudson County by use of a patron system headed by one Michael Pawl, the Burgomaster of Amsterdam, led to a period where individual Dutch settlers, tempted by the view from nearby Manhattan, slowly and individually took up homesteads within our county. In many ways those early settlers could be called "the first suburbanites" as they tended to establish their homes at good distances apart rather than to concentrate within one area. This wide disbursement of families would have costly and deadly consequences. As the European population of New Amsterdam grew, so too did conflicts between the settlers and the native population, made worst by poor leadership of the company's directors, and increasing misunderstanding of each party's culture. Often these conflicts would erupt into outright war-making Hudson County's far-flung neighbors easy prey for outraged natives. Time and time again Indian wars would flare, resulting in the murder of Hudson County residents and the burning of their homesteads. On a number of occasions local residents would be forced to flee across the river to the relative safety of Manhattan Island. One such war and flight from the area in 1643 was ignited by a horrific massacre in the area of what is now Liberty Science Center of an entire band of Indians, women and children included, by Dutch militia under orders of the Company Director, William Kieft. That war lasted some 18 months until a treaty was signed and the Dutch would once again wearily return to the area and re-occupy their farms.

One result of this war was the arrival of Peter Stuyvesant in 1646 as the new company director. Under Stuyvesant's wiser leadership relations with the natives improved and more Dutch settlers were given land grants and took up residents in our area. For some ten years peace prevailed until war once again erupted when a young Indian girl was shot dead while taking a peach from the tree of a Dutch settler in Manhattan. Again local Indian tribes took up the war tomahawk and laid waste to the area. Once again Dutch settlers in Hudson County fled for their lives to Manhattan. It was said that only one resident of Hudson County who stayed behind was spared his life.

Instead of fighting a costly war Stuyvesant rather elected to negotiate with the natives, especially since both sides had taken hostages to hold as pawns in the negotiations. During this time it seems that not one European lived in the area of Hudson County all having taken up residence in the safety of Manhattan.

Slowly negotiations proved fruitful and peace returned to the area. Now Stuyvesant was once again confronted by demands from the displaced residents to return to their homes across the river. Realizing that the very pattern of settlement of widely dispersed farms made defense of the settlers almost impossible, Stuyvesant hit upon a new plan of settlement. In 1658 a decree was issued that residents could return to the area only if they would agree to concentrate themselves within a village which could be easily defended from attack. To sweeten the deal, Stuyvesant hit upon a novel idea. As long as they concentrated their homes returning residents would be exempt from the payment of tithes and other burdens attached to the land, or in other words, Hudson County's first tax abatement.

Under this decree the Dutch settlers began to return to their former farms but were still reluctant to abandon their homes in favor of a village. The authorities took note of their reluctance and finally issued a degree on February 9, 1660 that all settlers must relocate their homes to a new defensible position within a palisade village under threat of confiscation of all of their possessions. In August, 1660 permission was granted for the establishment of a village beyond the Indian maize field on Bergen hill with the understanding that each lot owner would be required to begin to build a home within six months and provide at least one man able to bear and use arms. Sometime before November of that year the area of the present Bergen Square was selected for the settlement and was laid out in lots surrounded by a wooden palisade. Records indicate that by November, 1660 the village was settled and began to grow. Almost immediately religious services began to be held in the homes of the original settlers and shortly thereafter a log church was erected just outside the walls of the stockade behind the present day Provident Bank building, the first of four churches that would become to be known as "Old Bergen Church."

Daniel Van Winkle

By the turn of the Twentieth Century much had changed in the little Town of Bergen. The town itself would have disappeared into the present City of Jersey City created in the 1870s by the merger of the former towns of Van Vorst, Greenville, Hudson City, Bergen and the original Jersey City. Bergen Avenue which was once a tree shaded thoroughfare lined with beautiful Dutch homes, some dating back to colonial times, was quickly becoming the urban business center it is today. In 1926, to accommodate the widening of Bergen Avenue, 385 bodies were disinterred from the old Bergen Cemetery and moved to the Meadow Lawn section of Arlington Cemetery in Kearny where, today, a single monument marks their final resting place. Such drastic changes to the appearance of Old Bergen prompted a parishioner of the Old Bergen Church to become a "keeper of the history of our area."

Daniel Van Winkle, born in 1839, could trace his family history in Bergen back to the very beginning of the church. While his father operated a grocery store in the old Town of Bergen, he attended school at the Columbia Academy on the site of the current Martin Luther King School. Admitted to Rutgers University in 1855 and graduating in 1858 he was widely known as the schools oldest living alumni at the time of this death in 1935.

Admitted to the bar in 1863 he only briefly practice law, stating years later he could never reconcile himself to defending the guilty. After a short business career Daniel found his true calling when he gave himself over to the historical research and writing.

Van Winkle soon became one of the preeminent local historians, serving as a founding member of the Hudson County Historical Society. He wrote many times on the history of our area including two cornerstone books, "Old Bergen" and "The History of the Municipalities of Hudson County." In 1910 he wrote a series of articles on the history of Hudson County which appeared in the New York Times and were used as a guideline for a historical essay contest to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the founding of the Town of Bergen.

Today Daniel Van Winkle lies buried in Old Bergen Cemetery among a sea of his former family members.

John J. Toffey

The American Civil War took young men from farms, small towns and cities around the nation and threw them into a cauldron of fire which would temper the balance of their lives.

John J. Toffey and his brother Daniel Toffey moved with his parents from Westchester County, NY to Hudson County in 1854. Growing up in Hudson County the brothers became members of the Bergen Church and when the War of Rebellion broke out answered the call to arms for the preservation of the Union little knowing that the war would make them eyewitnesses to some of the seminal events in American history.

The older brother Daniel decided to enlist in the US Navy and was assigned to serve under his uncle, the great admiral, John Lorimer Worden, who won honor as the commander of the first Union ironside, Monitor, in her famous battle with the Confederate ironside, Merrimac, on March 9, 1862 off Hampton Roads, Virginia. Serving under his uncle during that historic engagement, Daniel was thrown to the deck and severely injured by the concussion of a shell exploding against the pilot house of the vessel.

While Daniel elected service to his country in the Navy, younger brother, John James, decided to serve in the army. First enlisting in the Twenty-First Regiment of New Jersey Volunteers on August 21, 1862, he served in all engagements of that regiment until being mustered out after nine months. Toffey immediately re-enlisted in the Thirty-Third Regiment of New Jersey volunteers and was commissioned a First Lieutenant. On November 23, 1863 his regiment was heavily engaged with Confederate troops near Chattanooga, Tennessee. When another officer was mortally wounded, Toffey was ordered forward to take his place. After running a gauntlet where bullets were said to "fly like hailstones," Toffey arrived in time to rally his troops and hold their position while being severely wounded in the hip. Thirty-four years later Toffey would be awarded his country's highest commendation when he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his distinguished gallantry in action

Judged to be too seriously injured to continue on active duty Toffey refused to leave the service of his country and accepted a transfer to the Veteran Reserve Corps in Washington, D.C. On April 14, 1865 John attended Ford's Theater with the intention of seeing both the play, "Our American Cousin," and President Abraham Lincoln, who had announced plans to attend the performance. Instead Toffey witnessed one of the watershed events in American history, the assassination of President Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth. Later writing to his grandmother Toffey stated if he had a revolver and the presence of mind he would have shot Booth dead on the spot.

Leaving the theater to return to his quarters Toffey soon saw a rider-less horse approach him. Thinking it may have something to do with the assassination he delivered it to his commanding officer. Later it was determined to be a horse that Booth had ridden earlier in the evening.

Returning to Hudson County Toffey engaged in business as a livestock dealer with his brothers in the area of Five Corners from 1866 to 1874 being one of the first companies to ship dressed beef to Europe. Yes, there was a time when you may have been more likely to be trampled by a herd of cattle on Newark Avenue rather than a New Jersey Transit bus.

Entering public service in 1875 John J. Toffey served at various times as a Jersey City Alderman, a member of the State Assembly, two terms as Hudson County Sheriff, a State Treasurer, and finally at the time of his death in 1911 as Port Warden. Toffey was buried with his parents in a family plot in Westchester County but a beautiful stained glass window in his honor was presented to Old Bergen Church where it can still be seen today.

His family continued in service to their country. His son, John J. Toffey, a life long soldier, served in both the Spanish American and First World Wars. At the time of his death in 1935 he was serving as a Major General commanding the Forty Forth Division of the New Jersey National Guard. His funeral service was held in Old Bergen Church with burial at Arlington National Cemetery. His son, also named John J Toffey, was killed in action with the U.S. Army in Sicily during WWII.

Jane Tuers

On the morning of June 29, 1776 it became difficult to be an American Patriot in Hudson County. On that morning some forty-five English ships of the line were seen to drop anchor inside Sandy Hook ten miles beyond the Narrows. A Pennsylvania rifleman said their masts looked like a forest of trimmed pine trees. "I declare I thought all of London was afloat," he later reported. These ships were just the vanguard of a British fleet which would total over 120 ships with over 25,000 British troops, all destined for New York harbor and the American army lead by George Washington. This huge armada was designed to carry out the British plan to end the American Revolution. Put simply the plan was to capture New York City; seize control of the Hudson River, cut the American colonies in two; then surround and destroy Washington's army which would be isolated from reinforcements. This plan may have worked, if it had not been for the patriotism of two parishioners of Old Bergen Church.

After landing his troops on Staten Island the leader of the British forces, General Howe, in a series of master military strokes which exploited the inexperience of the American army quickly forced them from Brooklyn Heights, chased them across Manhattan and out of New York and finally south through New Jersey into winter quarters in Pennsylvania.

Such great initial success was followed by failure as the British could not capture the Patriot stronghold of West Point which controlled all passage upon the Hudson River. Without West Point the British could never control the Hudson.

Settling into quarters in Manhattan while establishing a British stronghold at Paulus Hook, Howe contemplated his next move. During this period the British fort at Paulus Hook served to project British authority to northern New Jersey. From the fort raids would be launched in which local citizens who had shown too much revolutionary zeal would be rounded up and brought back to be sent to imprisonment in the sugar houses of New York City or worst, the prison ships of Gravesend Bay, an almost sure death warrant.

Despite living under the shadow of British rule patriotic spirit was not absent in Hudson County but merely went under cover. Washington and his generals, especially Lafayette, often visited the area to spy on British movements from the protection of Bergen Hill. Washington and Lafayette were reported to have discussed war strategy at the Apple Tree House in old Bergen. They may have even used the occasions to interview American spies who may have had information to report on the enemy. Then, as now, Hudson County was a bedroom community for Manhattan with Hudson residents traveling daily to the larger city to ply their wares. One such colonial commuter was Jane Tuers, a Bergen Church parishioner, who lived at the current site of Hudson Catholic High School with her husband, Nicholas.

Legend says that on one visit to New York Jane stopped by Fraunces Tavern and spoke with its patriot owner Sam Fraunces. Fraunces told Jane about a conversation he had overheard from British troops about the plan for Benedict Arnold to turn the fortress at West Point over to the British, a plan which would have greatly damaged the American cause.

Returning to Bergen Jane relayed the story to her brother, Daniel Van Reypen, a staunch patriot. Van Reypen quickly rode to Hackensack to give the report to General Anthony Wayne, who immediately had him give the same report to General Washington. Jane's story confirmed earlier reports Washington had received about Arnold's treachery and allowed Washington to prevent the loss of West Point and possibly the entire war.

Today Jane Tuers lies in an unmarked grave in Old Bergen Cemetery, ironically in land the church had purchased from the Tuers family in 1831 to expand the church cemetery.