From the Union of Utrecht to the Declaration of Independence: Dutch Influence on the Formation of the United States of America

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On August 27, 1664, four English warships arrived at the harbor of New Amsterdam, the capital of New Netherland. This Dutch colony, which at its height consisted of present-day New York and parts of the surrounding states, would become an integral part of the newly founded United States of America. The warships pointed their cannons at the New Amsterdam Fort and demanded the Dutch colonists surrender to the English Crown, which they did without much resistance. New Amsterdam was renamed New York, in honor of King George III's brother James, the Duke of York. Thus ended the official Dutch presence in the Americas. Recently, however, twelve thousand pages of documentation regarding the early Dutch colony have been published by the New Netherland Research Center, shedding new light on its role in early American history. Far from the monoculture of the Puritan-dominated British colonies of New England or tobacco-minded Virginia, New Netherland had many of the characteristics we think of as "American" today.

This article examines the significance of Dutch influence in shaping America in matters of government, cultural and religious pluralism during the period between 1609-1776 by comparing the history and foundational documents of the sixteenth-century Dutch

Republic and its colony with that of the early American Republic. This comparison argues that the history of the Dutch Republic, its policy of religious toleration, and its tradition of cultural pluralism were significant factors in shaping early American political history. The influence of the Dutch Republic and its New Netherland colony remain underrepresented in early American studies today, which are still predominantly Anglocentric.[1]

This article will also connect the Dutch Republic to the American Republic, both directly and indirectly via the Dutch presence in New Netherland. Because this article spans three centuries and focuses on three regions, it will prioritize structure over strict chronology. Divided into two sections, I begin with the direct influence of the sixteenth-century Dutch Republic on the United States. Comparing primary source documentation from both states shows the influence of the former on the latter. Second, this article compares New Netherland primary sources with key early U.S. documents to trace indirect influence from the Dutch Republic through the colony into early American political thought. To contextualize this influence, it first reviews the historical conditions surrounding the formation of the Dutch Republic in the Low Countries.

The Dutch Republic (1579-1795)

In the early sixteenth century, the Low Countries, constituting of present day Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg, were ruled by the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. Under his reign, the Low Countries were transformed from a loose collection of semi-autonomous provinces into a centralized and prosperous state. While Charles was likely fond of this land (he was born and raised in the Low Countries), his successor Philip II of Spain was evidently not. Philip's ruthless persecution of non-Catholics and crippling taxation made his rule deeply unpopular among Protestant merchants, who dominated political life in the northern provinces. Some form of representative government had previously developed in the Netherlands under Charles V, but under Philip this reverted to authoritarianism and repression. The Inquisition ruthlessly persecuted and massacred

1 Notable examples of the omission of the Dutch presence in Early American History: Richard Bell, *The American Revolution and the Fate of the World*, (Riverhead Books, 2025), and Emily Sneff, *When The Declaration Was News*, (Oxford University Press, 2026).

Protestants while troops were stationed in private residences to keep the citizens under control. Numerous petitions for relief by the States General, the Dutch governing body, fell on deaf ears.[2]

The struggle for independence that followed became known as the Eighty Years' War (1568-1648). The anti-Philip alliance, which was centered in the northern provinces, would become known as the Union of Utrecht (1579) and was the first step in the formation of a Dutch Republic. When it became clear that relief could not be achieved under the rule of Philip, the Union declared independence with the *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe* or Declaration of Abjuration (DOA). In said document, the States General stated that Philip had forfeited his right to rule the Dutch due to his failure to fulfill his monarchical obligations and committing crimes against the people of the Low Countries.[3]

The circumstances surrounding the Dutch and American declarations of independence are remarkably similar. In each, there was a distant and repressive monarch, punitive taxation of the population, and the quartering of troops in private residences following a popular uprising. With both groups, the above similarities caused the subject territories to form an alliance and publicly declare their independence with a document which argued that their former ruler had failed to fulfill his monarchical duties. A closer look at the constitution of the Union and the Early American Articles of Confederation reveals further similarities in language and intent.

The Union of Utrecht and the Articles of Confederation

"It is surprising and to the credit of our ancestors, that these inhabitants of another continent, after a lapse of some two centuries, adopted practically the same measures and arrangements as they

2 *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe* (Leiden: Charles Silvius, 1581), Nationaal Archief, The Hague. Not only were these petitioners unsuccessful, they were dispossessed and sentenced to death for their pleas.

3 *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe* (Leiden: Charles Silvius, 1581), Nationaal Archief, The Hague. This document, much like the Declaration of Independence, is largely made up of a list of grievances against Philip II. The crime of unlawful persecution of his loyal subjects being his most grievous one, which is why the drafters declare they have the right to renounce their Oath of Loyalty to Spain.

did when drafting the Union of Utrecht."[4] Thus spoke Pieter Paulus, the first president of the Batavian Republic, which had formed after the collapse of the Dutch Republic in 1795. This sentiment was further reflected on the American side, though perhaps more negatively, with some of the founders stating "[i]t is no wonder our Government should not work well, being formed on the Dutch model where circumstances are so materially different."[5] The direct influence of the former on the latter is most apparent, however, in the similar structure of these documents, with each consisting of a preamble in where the drafters declare a bond of unity of individual territories and a list of articles stating the legal particulars of this bond.

The constitution of the Union, dated January 29, 1579, states that these provinces will "confederate and unite…into perpetuity."[6] This bears a striking similarity to the Articles of Confederation's phrasing of "confederation and perpetual union."[7] The document continues that the "aforementioned provinces in conformity and to the fulfillment of the aforementioned union and confederacy, shall support each other against all forces and violence."[8] This again can be compared with the Articles "the said states hereby severally enter into a firm league of friendship with each other…binding themselves to assist each other, against all force."[9]

4 Andrew Langer. "The 1579 Netherlands Constitution and the Founders' Vision for Careful Balance of Federal Powers While Protecting the States," *Constituting America*, 2025 https://constitutingamerica.org/90day-aer-1579-netherlands-constitution-and-the-founders-vision-for-careful-balance-federal-powers-while-protecting-the-states-guest-essayist-andrew-langer/

5 Andrew Langer. "The 1579 Netherlands Constitution and the Founders' Vision for Careful Balance of Federal Powers While Protecting the States," *Constituting America*, 2025. William Grayson, friend of James Madison and member of the United States Congress https://constitutingamerica.org/90day-aer-1579-netherlands-constitution-and-the-founders-vision-for-careful-balance-federal-powers-while-protecting-the-states-guest-essayist-andrew-langer/

6 Jan van Nassau, *Union of Utrecht*. Translated manuscript. *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times: A Documentary History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) Union of Utrecht 1579, article I "*confederren ende vereenyghen… ten ewygen daeghen."* I have used my own translations of the original Dutch texts, except where noted otherwise.

7 *Articles of Confederation*, U.S. Continental Congress, (November 15, 1777), National Archives https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/articles-of-confederation, preamble.

8 Jan van Nassau, *Union of Utrecht*, article II. "*voorsz. provincien in conformiteyt ende tot voltrecking van de voorsz. enicheydt ende verbant gehouden sullen wesen malcanderen met lijff, goet ende bloet by te staen jegens alle fortsen ende gewelden."*

9 *Articles of Confederation*, U.S. Continental Congress, (November 15, 1777), National Archives https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/articles-of-confederation, article III.

Further similarities can be found in the sections about common defense and the financial burdens of war. The constitution of the Union states "those aforementioned provinces shall be beholden to assist each other and to help defend against all foreign lords… that would do them in particular or in general, harm or injustice, or would make war upon them."[10] This compares favorably with the Articles' "their common defense… binding themselves to assist each other, against all force offered to, or attacks made upon them."[11] Both documents also state that the costs of war shall be borne by the government, respectively in Article V of the Union's constitution, and Article VIII of the Articles of Confederation.[12]

Each document also stipulates that individual member states cannot change the terms of the agreement. The Union's constitution states that amendments can be made by "common advice and consent of the aforementioned allies."[13] The Articles note that "alteration be agreed to in a Congress of the United States" as the sole option for amending this constitution. Both the Dutch States General and the Continental Congress present a clear power-structure within their respective republics, where a consensual federal government has the final say in matters of war and constitution. Considering these similarities in circumstances, structure, and language, John Adams remarked that "the originals of the two Republics are so much alike that the history of the one seems but a transcript of the other," further supporting the notion that the constitution of the Union was a significant influence on the Articles of Confederation.[14]

10 Jan van Nassau, *Union of Utrecht*. Translated manuscript. *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times: A Documentary History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) Union of Utrecht 1579, article III, "*die voorsz. provincien oick gehouden sullen wesen in gelycke maniere malcanderen te assisteren ende helpen defenderen jegens alle uytheemsche ende inheemsche heeren, vorsten ofte princen, landen, provincien, steden ofte leden van dien, die hem int generael ofte particulier enyge fortsen, gewelden ofte ongelijck souden willen aendoen ofte oorloge maecken*."

11 *Articles of Confederation*, U.S. Continental Congress, (November 15, 1777), National Archives https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/articles-of-confederation, article III.

12 ibid, article VIII.

13 Jan van Nassau, *Union of Utrecht*. Translated manuscript. *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times: A Documentary History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) Union of Utrecht 1579, article XXII "*gemeen advys ende consent van de voorsz. bontgenoten.*"

14 Wijnand W. Mijnhardt, "The Declaration of Independence and the Dutch Legacy," In *Opening Statements*, ed. Albert M. Rosenblatt and Julia C. Rosenblatt, (State University of New York Press, 2013), 59, cited from: Thomas Jefferson: *Writing*s, ed. Merrill D. Peterson, (New York: Library of America, 1984), 16.

The Plakkaat van Verlatinghe and the Declaration of Independence

"[T]he history of the Dutch revolution…proved that a secession of some colonies would not be so dangerous as some apprehended."[15] This observation, made by Thomas Jefferson, merits a closer look at two more foundational documents of the two Republics, the DOA and American Declaration of Independence (ADOI).

The first similarity of the two documents is the structure. Unlike the previous comparison between the constitution of the Union and the Articles of Confederation, the syllogistic form of both the DOA and ADOI is unique in foundational documentation of both periods, and has no English precedent, as argued by Stephen E. Lucas in his investigation of the origins of the Declaration.[16] Both the DOA and ADOI start with a preamble, in the form of a major premise, followed by a minor premise, and end with a conclusion.[17]

We will begin with the language of the preamble of both documents. The DOA, after identifying the drafters of the document as the "States General of the United Netherlands," states that this declaration "is something apparent," or even "self-evident."[18] Compared with the ADOI, we see a similar identification of the "thirteen united states" at the start, following a statement that "these truths" are "self-evident."[19]

Both preambles continue to expand on the justifications for renouncing their allegiance to their respective monarchs. Both groups of authors claim that they derive the right to do so from a "Divine Creator." The DOA states that "these subjects were not created by God to serve the Prince."[20] The ADOI phrases this as "they are en-

15 Thomas Jefferson, *Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson*. Autobiography with introduction and notes. (The Knickerbocker Press, 1914), 26.
16 Stephen E. Lucas, "The Rhetorical Ancestry of the Declaration of Independence," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 161.
17 ibid, 161-165.
18 *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe* (Leiden: Charles Silvius, 1581), Nationaal Archief, The Hague. "*Staten Generael van de geunieerde Nederlanden", "also een yegelick kennelick is."*
19 U.S. Continental Congress, *Declaration of Independence*, (July 4, 1776), National Archives, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration, preamble.
20 *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe* (Leiden: Charles Silvius, 1581), Nationaal Archief, The Hague, "*d'ondersaten niet en sijn van Godt geschapen tot behoef van den Prince,"* preamble.

dowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights."[21] The DOA implies the "god given rights" of its citizens implicitly by stating that they are not to serve as slaves to the Monarch, where the ADOI explicitly states a similar reason for these "unalienable Rights."[22]

When the monarch does not protect these rights, both documents continue, they become a tyrant, giving their subjects the right to renounce their loyalty. The DOA describes this process as "when he does not hold to this, but instead of protecting his subjects, seeks to oppress them... should not be held as a Prince, but as a Tyrant, and may be by right and reason, especially after deliberation by the States of the Land (the States General) cease to be recognized as a Prince, and be renounced."[23] This can be compared with the statements in the ADOI "[t]hat whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it… when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government… having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States."[24] When compared, it becomes clear that both documents contain similar elements in their justification for declaring independence: the unalienable rights of the populace and the duty of the monarch to maintain them and the rightful response of the populace when confronted with a monarch who, instead of fulfilling their duty, resorts to tyranny.

Following these preambles, both documents continue with a list of complaints against the monarchs. They provide evidence of the monarch's subjects' unjust treatment, their justification in designating the monarchs tyrannical, and their decision to declare them-

21 U.S. Continental Congress, *Declaration of Independence*, (July 4, 1776), National Archives, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration, preamble.
22 *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe* (Leiden: Charles Silvius, 1581), Nationaal Archief, The Hague, preamble, *als slaven te dienen,* translates to 'serve as slaves'.
23 *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe* (Leiden: Charles Silvius, 1581), Nationaal Archief, The Hague, "[*e*]*n so wanneer hy sulcks niet en doet, maer in stede van zijne ondersaten te beschermen, deselve soeckt te verdrucken…moet ghehouden worden niet als Prince, maer als een Tyran ende voor sulcks nae recht ende redene mach ten minsten van zijne ondersaten, besondere by deliberatie van de Staten van den Lande, voor egeen Prince meer bekent, maer verlaeten",* preamble.
24 U.S. Continental Congress, *Declaration of Independence*, (July 4, 1776), National Archives, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration, preamble.

selves independent from the monarchs' tyrannical rule over them. These lists of grievances are lengthy in both the DOA and ADOI, and thus defy the scope of this paper, so instead I will highlight three of the most important. On the administration of justice, the DOA states that Philip "has altered the execution of Justice to the customs of Spain, directly against the customs of the land."[25] This bears similarity to ADOI's claim that the British king had "obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers."[26] Both grievances effectively protest against being deprived of the right to dispense justice autonomously. This does not imply that the judicial systems in place were similar to each other, merely that it is evidence that both the sixteenth-century Dutch and the eighteenth-century American revolutionaries were aggrieved by their monarch's unilateral interference in their justice systems.

On the forced garrisoning of troops in citizens' private homes, the DOA informs us that "the rest of the good citizens, bearing the burden…of the mean Spanish soldiers that are garrisoned in their houses."[27] When compared to the ADOI grievance of "[q]uartering large bodies of armed troops among us," we see further evidence of the DOA's influence: both documents find the garrisoning of troops in private homes an unacceptable burden on the citizenry.[28]

Unfair taxation, to be imposed without the consent of the citizenry, and raised forcibly to the citizens' disadvantage is another complaint that makes a significant appearance in both documents. In the DOA, it is stated that "they are forced to pay moneys…that are employed against their fellow citizens and those who risked their life for the Land's liberty."[29] Although the language is more poetic than

25 *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe* (Leiden: Charles Silvius, 1581), Nationaal Archief, The Hague, "*de principale plaetsen d'ordre van Justitie nae de maniere van Spaegnien (dierecktelick teghens de previlegien van den Lande) te veranderen."*
26 U.S. Continental Congress, *Declaration of Independence*, (July 4, 1776), National Archives, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration, list of grievances.
27 *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe* (Leiden: Charles Silvius, 1581), Nationaal Archief, The Hague, "[*d*]*e reste van de goede ingesetene, bouen den ouerlast die …deur gemeyne Spaensche soldaten t'heuren huyse in garnisoen liggende",* list of grievances.
28 U.S. Continental Congress, *Declaration of Independence*, (July 4, 1776), National Archives, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration, list of grievances.
29 *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe* (Leiden: Charles Silvius, 1581), Nationaal Archief, The Hague, "*heur bedwingende tot gheldinghe…om t'employeren tegens heur mede Lantsaten en de gene die het Lants vrijheyt met perijckel van heuren lijue aventuerden."*

the ADOI , it does bear similarity to "imposing taxes on us without our consent."[30] It certainly describes the situation in both the sixteenth-century United Provinces and the early United States aptly, where Spain's Philip and Britain's George, respectively, burdened their subjects with heavy taxation without giving them a place in their governing bodies.

Both documents end with statements professing that they have done their utmost to address their grievances with the monarch through petitions, all of which, according to the DOA, "did not achieve anything with the King (Philip II)...and this only served to do harm against us."[31] This is mirrored in the ADOI with the statement that the citizens of the thirteen colonies have "[p]etitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury."[32] In both cases, an unyielding monarch fails to perform his monarchical duty of care but instead retaliates against his subjects. From the points of view of the authors, this breaks the pact between them and their rulers.

In the conclusion of each document, the drafters surmise that due to their sovereigns' infidelity towards them, they have no choice left but to renounce their oath of loyalty, and declare independence. In the DOA, the States General "declare that, as the very last resort, we are forced to unanimously declare the King of Spain, *ipso jure* (Latin: by law) to be forfeited of his rule, his rights, and his inheritance of the aforementioned Lands."[33] The ADOI provides us with a similar statement, claiming that, "[w]e, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled…do… solemnly publish and declare…that they are Absolved from all Alle-

30 U.S. Continental Congress, *Declaration of Independence*, (July 4, 1776), National Archives, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration, list of grievances.
31 *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe* (Leiden: Charles Silvius, 1581), Nationaal Archief, The Hague, "*experientie beuonden, dat wy met de selue remonstrantien ende handelinghen niet en consten yet vanden Coninc verwerven…ende dienden om de…rigeur tegens haer te werke te stellen",* list of grievances.
32 U.S. Continental Congress, *Declaration of Independence*, (July 4, 1776), National Archives, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration, list of grievances.
33 *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe* (Leiden: Charles Silvius, 1581), Nationaal Archief, The Hague. "*D O E N TE WETENE, dat wy t'ghene voorsz. ouergemerckt ende door den uutersten noot, als vore gedrongen zijnde, by ghemeynen accoorde, deliberatie ende ouerdraghe, den Coninc van Spaegnien verclaert hebben, ende verclaren mits desen, ipso jure, vervallen van zijne Heerschappye, gerechticheyt, en erffenisse van de voorsz. Landen."*

giance to the British Crown."[34] Here again, the monarchs' subjects - the Dutch and the English colonists - having stated their grievances, both come to the conclusion that they have no choice but to forfeit their allegiance to their overlords.

Of further interest is the claim in both documents that the right of the drafters to declare independence is derived from the "Laws of Nature."[35] The DOA phrases this as "according to the law of nature, to protect us and our fellow citizens' rights, privileges, and liberties of our Fatherland."[36] The ADOI includes this in its preamble stating that "when… it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands… the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them… that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation."[37] This is remarkable in the case of the DOA because it echoes the language of the Enlightenment but precedes it by more than a century, whereas the founders of the United States were products of this particular era. A possible explanation for this could be the prevalence of the Humanist tradition in the Low Countries, a predecessor of the Enlightenment, starting with Erasmus of Rotterdam in the early sixteenth century.[38]

By examining the constitution of the Union and DOA and comparing them with their American equivalents, the Articles of Confederation and ADOI, it becomes clear that there are many similarities in structure, content, and language between these documents.

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34 U.S. Continental Congress, *Declaration of Independence*, (July 4, 1776), National Archives, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration, list of grievances.

35 Mark Murphy, "The Natural Law Tradition in Ethics". In Zalta, Edward N. (ed.). *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 ed.). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, "Natural law theory asserts that certain rights and moral values are inherent in human nature and can be understood universally, independent of enacted laws or societal norms."

36 *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe* (Leiden: Charles Silvius, 1581), Nationaal Archief, The Hague, "*volgende de wet der natueren, tot beschermenisse ende bewaernisse van onsen ende den andere Landtsaten rechten, priuilegien, oude hercomen ende vrijheden van ons Vaderlant",* list of grievances.

37 U.S. Continental Congress, *Declaration of Independence*, July 4, 1776, National Archives, https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration, preamble.

38 Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1532) was a prominent Dutch humanist and philosopher, widely considered one of the most influential thinkers of his era. Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) was a philosopher and political theorist, who was one of the founders of the concept of international law, rooted in the idea of natural law.

However, the direct influence of the former can only be established by investigating the availability of Dutch documents in the early United States. Did the founders have access to these documents? Were they aware of its contents? How did this information travel across the Atlantic? To answer these questions, we will have to take a closer look at the Dutch colony of New Netherland.

Dutch Influence via the New Netherland Colony

In May of 1624, the *Nieu Nederlandt*, a ship chartered by the Dutch West India Company (WIC), arrived on the shores of the Hudson River. It carried with it thirty families, most of them Walloons from modern-day Belgium, who were likely refugees from the Eighty Years War.[39] These refugees were the first Europeans to become permanent residents in the area that had been dubbed *Nova Belgica* in Latin but *Nieu Nederlandt* (New Netherland) in Dutch. It was an area that encompassed almost half of the Early United States thirteen colonies (Figure 1).

The WIC had claimed these lands for the Dutch Republic as early as 1609, when Henry Hudson had explored the lands surrounding the river that would be named after him. The lucrative fur trade was what initially drew the interest of the WIC. A by-product of this was its relatively benign policy concerning the native population, seen in their instructions to not "do the Indians any harm or violence" and that they "be shown honesty, faithfulness, and sincerity in all contracts, dealings, and intercourse".[40] This was, of course, self-serving: the WIC believed that in order to maximize their profits, their Native American trade partners had to be dealt with fairly and be treated as equals.

Henry Hudson had also noted in his report to the WIC that the lands he had explored while searching for his fabled Northwest Passage were "the finest for cultivation that I have ever in my life set my foot upon."[41] This prompted the WIC to start sending colonists to New Netherland in the 1620s, with the abovementioned

39 Julie van den Hout, "Voyages of New Netherland," https://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/history-and-heritage/digital-exhibitions/voyages-of-new-netherland, voyage ID v_033
40 Russell Shorto, *The Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan and the Forgotten Colony That Shaped America,* (Vintage Books, 2005), 47.
41 ibid, 33.

Nieu Nederlandt being the first ship. Most of these settlers were refugees who were fleeing religious persecution and war. The Northern provinces of the Dutch Republic had long been a safe haven for the victims of religious persecution, where pragmatic religious toleration ensured them relative religious freedom and safety from the dreaded Spanish Inquisition (1478-1834). These provinces also were relatively safe from the effects of war in Europe.[42] Thus, Walloons, Germans, French Huguenots, Spanish Jews, Danes, Swedes, Norwegians, and Poles who had immigrated to the Dutch Republic made up a large part of the initial "Dutch" settlers of New Netherland.[43] The new ideas concerning religious liberty followed this diverse group of settlers.[44] Further, despite the WIC's ordnance that the Dutch Reformed Church be the colony's official church, early forms of religious pluralism and multiculturalism quickly became predominant in New Netherland.[45] This was likely due to the profit-oriented nature of the colony.

Although the lifespan of New Netherland was a relatively short one (1609-1664), it left a significant footprint on early American History. Through it, the Dutch settlers imported ideas of religious liberties and self-determination to the Americas, ideas that would significantly contribute to the American Revolution a century later. How these ideas were imported and in which way they manifested themselves will be the subject of this section.

A pivotal figure to introduce the aforementioned ideas to the Americas was without a doubt Adriaen van der Donck (ca. 1618-1655). While many Dutch and Early American historians are likely unfamiliar with his name, their counterparts in New York are not. This is because his nickname *Jonckheer* or Yonkers was the name given to an area north of Manhattan. Van der Donck was a lawyer who studied at the University of Leiden, which was at the time the intellectual center

42 Maarten Prak, *The Dutch Republic In The Seventeenth Century*, (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1-9. Prak argues that the relative internal safety of the Dutch Republic, caused by its strong army and navy, was a significant factor in the economic and cultural boom known as the Dutch Golden Age (1588-1672).

43 David Steven Cohen, "How Dutch Were the Dutch of New Netherland?" *New York History* 62, no. 1, (January 1981): 51-53.

44 Evan Haefeli, *New Netherland and the Dutch Origins of American Religious Liberty*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 20.

45 George L. Smith, *Religion and Trade in New Netherland: Dutch Origins and American Development*. (Cornell University Press, 1973), 134.

of the Dutch Republic and where early pioneers of the Enlightenment such as René Descartes and Baruch Spinoza worked. As a Doctor of Law, he would have been very familiar with the Dutch Republic's foundational documents, the Union of Utrecht, and the DOA.



Fig.1. *Novi Belgii Novaeque Angliae Nec Non partis Virginiae Tabula*. Iusto Danckers' map of New Netherland. Amsterdam, ca. 1684.

In 1641, van der Donck set sail for New Netherland on the WIC ship the *Eykenboom* (Oak Tree).[46] After a short and unsuccessful stint as the *schout of Rensselaerswyck*, he relocated to New Amsterdam where he quickly became an influential figure.[47] The Dutch inhabitants of this booming settlement had become dissatisfied with the authoritarian rule of the WIC's directors general, Willem Kieft, who had started a disastrous war with their Native American neighbors against the will of the settlers. Known as Kieft's War (1643-1645), the conflict caused death, ruin, and, most importantly to the WIC, a

46 Julie van den Hout, "Voyages of New Netherland," https://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/history-and-heritage/digital-exhibitions/voyages-of-new-netherland, voyage ID v_083

47 A *schout* was a sort of travelling lawman, sheriff, or bailiff, of an area near present-day Albany in upstate New York.

loss of profits for the colony. His replacement, Peter Stuyvesant, was not much better in the eyes of the colonists: he ended the war but maintained the WIC's authoritarian outlook. The disgruntled settlers, both non-Dutch refugees and Dutch-born colonists, had been imbued with the values of the Dutch Republic and had exported them to New Netherland.[48] This allowed van der Donck to organize them using his knowledge of Dutch Republican law.

In 1649, van der Donck returned to the Dutch Republic to petition the States General on behalf of the people of New Amsterdam, where he had been active in setting up a municipal council to counter the director general's authoritarian rule. To strengthen his case against the WIC, he published a pamphlet titled *Remonstrance of New Netherland*. This served two purposes, the first of which was its promotion of immigration to New Netherland. More importantly, however, it argued for WIC's removal as the governing authority of the colony and its replacement with a government styled after that of the Dutch Republic itself. In encouraging colonization, the *Remonstrance* was highly successful: van der Donck's descriptions of New Netherland were so attractive that ships heading for the colony had to turn many prospective settlers away.[49] More Dutch colonists, imbued with the ideas of governance of the Dutch Republic, would also strengthen van der Donck's position, and thus serve the second purpose of the *Remonstrance*. This was to submit evidence to the States General demonstrating the failure of the WIC's governance of New Netherland and the need to establish new governance with "moral, honorable and intelligent rule[r]s who are not very indigent nor yet very covetous."[50] In other words, the settlers argued that it was better that they govern themselves. This petition of self-governance is of further interest due to its structural similarities with the DOA and ADOI. This is because it contains a lengthy preamble describing the deplorable state of government in the colony, a list of grievances against the "tyrannical" rule of the directors-general of the WIC, and

48 Jaap Jacobs, *The Colony of New Netherland: A Dutch Colony in Seventeenth-Century America,* (Brill Academic Publishers, 2005), 189.
49 Russell Shorto, *The Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan and the Forgotten Colony That Shaped America,* (Vintage Books, 2005), 228.
50 Adriaen van der Donck, *Remonstrance of New Netherlands*, (Weed, Parsons and Company, 1856), Library of Congress, 49.

a conclusion in which a preferable form of governance is suggested.[51] It differs however, in its intent. Van der Donck does not plead for independence, but for permission from the Dutch States General to change the governance of New Netherland to one similar to that of the Dutch Republic.

Ultimately, van der Donck's petition failed. Although the States General were inclined to favor the petition, the onset of the First Anglo-Dutch War (1652-1654) caused them to undo their decision. They needed the military strength of the WIC to protect their interests overseas and were thus unwilling to dispossess them of "their" colony.[52] Van der Donck had failed in his petition, but he returned to New Amsterdam with his *Remonstrance* and many new settlers, most of which were Dutch-born *burghers* or citizens who shared his ideas of representative governance. Ironically, these ideas would culminate in the remarkable end of the New Netherland colony and the beginning of the Early American identity.

The End of New Netherland and the Seeds of Early American Identity

On August 27, 1664, a fleet of four English warships arrived at the harbor of New Amsterdam. This should have been the end of the story of the Dutch effort in North America, but, in some ways, it was more like a new beginning. The Dutch settlers, represented by van der Donck, had petitioned the Dutch Republic's States General for independence from the WIC, under whose governance New Netherland "will never flourish…on the contrary 'twill waste and decay."[53] Their petition had failed but the WIC's director general Peter Stuyvesant was infuriated by the efforts of the New Netherlanders to oust him. This can be seen in how the de-facto leader of the settlers, van der Donck, was barred from practicing law or serving in any public office.[54] The disgruntled settlers would have to look elsewhere to rid themselves of the WIC's "tyranny." Enter Richard Nicholls and

51 Adriaen van der Donck, *Remonstrance of New Netherlands*, 27-50.
52 Russell Shorto, *The Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan and the Forgotten Colony That Shaped America,* (Vintage Books, 2005), 249.
53 Adriaen van der Donck, *Remonstrance of New Netherlands*, (Weed, Parsons and Company, 1856), Library of Congress, 48.
54 Russell Shorto, *The Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan and the Forgotten Colony That Shaped America,* (Vintage Books, 2005), 253.

his fleet of four English warships.

Commander Nicholls realized that four frigates, containing three hundred English soldiers, would have a difficult time subduing New Netherland, a vast area of land with a population that had expanded to seven or eight thousand by 1664.[55] Stuyvesant wanted to fight, but his requests for reinforcements from the WIC were not forthcoming, the fortifications were in disrepair, and, most importantly, his "subjects" had no interest in resistance. To the unhappy New Netherlanders, the English fleet was the answer to their predicament. The resulting document, drawn up on September 29, 1664, is commonly known as the *Artykelen van 't Overgaen van Nieu Nederlandt* or Articles of Surrender of New Netherland (ASNN). The word *overgaen* can also be translated as "transition" or transfer, which in this case would be more appropriate because this was a transfer of power from the WIC to the English Crown.

In the ASNN, we again see similarities to foundational documents of the early United States, in this case the US Constitution of 1789 and the Bill of Rights of 1791. It should also be noted that all these documents were ratified in what would become New York and that Gouverneur Morris, who was responsible for drafting the Constitution, was of Dutch descent.[56] That the Dutch could remain in what now was to be named New York was stipulated in the ASNN under Article III, which stated "everyone shall be a free *burgher* (citizen) and keep their lands, houses, goods, ships."[57] That they were able to not only maintain their rights, but govern New York according to their custom was stipulated in article XV. It mandates that "All subaltern citizens, officers, magistrates shall continue in their place."[58] When it comes to self-government, Article XXI promises that the inhabitants of New Amsterdam "may choose their own representatives and

55 Jaap Jacobs, *The Colony of New Netherland: A Dutch Colony in Seventeenth-Century America,* (Brill Academic Publishers, 2005), 47.
56 National Archives, "The Founding Fathers: Pennsylvania," https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/founding-fathers-pennsylvania#gmorris
57 J.D.Decker, *Artykelen van 't overgaen van Nieuw-Nederlandt*, (New Amsterdam 1664), New York City Municipal Archives, article III, "*Yeder een sal zijn een Vrij Borger en behouden hare Landerven, Huysen, Goederen, Schepen."*
58 ibid, "*Alle subalterne Borghers, Officiers, Magistraten sullen continueeren in hare plaetse".*

these representatives will have a free vote in all public particulars."[59] An Oath of Loyalty to the English Crown had to be sworn, but to most New Netherlanders this was likely preferable over the repressive rule of the WIC, which had aimed to restrict the Dutch settlers' emerging desire of representative government. In addition, freedom of travel to and from the colony, free trade, freedom of religion, and Dutch inheritance law were all guaranteed under the ASNN.[60]

Religious pluralism and religious toleration, unique to the Dutch Republic and exported to New Netherland, were codified in Article VIII of the ASNN in its promise that the Dutch "shall keep and enjoy freedom of conscience and religion."[61] This echoes in the First Amendment's free exercise of religion.[62] It is reasonable to assume that this religious liberty, a main cause of the Dutch struggle for independence in the sixteenth century, traveled to the New World via New Netherland's ASNN to end up in the Bill of Rights. The Puritans were less likely to adopt such legislation in their English colonies and many early English settlers sought to escape religious repression by fleeing to New Netherland.[63]

Another stipulation that likely made this ideological journey pertained to the garrisoning of soldiers in private homesteads. Codified in the DOA in the sixteenth century, it was also reflected in the ASNN with the statement that "no Manhattan man or inhabitant shall be charged with quartering in [soldiers]."[64] This compares to "No Soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house" as laid down in the Third Amendment of the United States Constitution.[65]

Representative self-government, religious toleration, free trade, and an abhorrence for the quartering of soldiers in private

59 ibid, article XXI"*vermogen haer Gedeputeerdens te verkiesen ende dese Gedeputeerden sullen vrye stemmen hebben in alle publijcque Besongies."*
60 J.D.Decker, *Artykelen van 't overgaen van Nieuw-Nederlandt*, (New Amsterdam 1664), New York City Municipal Archives, articles VI, VII, VIII, XI.
61 ibid*,* article VIII.
62 *Constitution of the United States*, www.constitutioncenter.org, Bill of Rights, Amendment I.
63 Jaap Jacobs, *The Colony of New Netherland: A Dutch Colony in Seventeenth-Century America,* (Brill Academic Publishers, 2005), 153-154.
64 J.D.Decker, *Artykelen van 't overgaen van Nieuw-Nederlandt*, (New Amsterdam 1664), New York City Municipal Archives, article X, "[*g*]*een Manathans Man ofte Inwoonder sal eenige inquartieringe opgelegt worden."*
65 *Constitution of the United States*, www.constitutioncenter.org, Bill of Rights, Amendment III.

homes can all be traced back to the Dutch struggle for independence in the sixteenth century. These ideas traveled with Dutch settlers to New Netherland in the seventeenth century, where, after the transfer to the English Crown, they became part of Early American identity and were reflected in their revolutionary documents. However, were the Founders of the United States aware of these Dutch ideas and were Dutch documents available to them?

Conclusion: The Availability of Dutch Documents and Ideas to the Founders

'[The history of Holland] and the great characters it exhibits... have been particularly studied, admired, and imitated in every [American] state.'[66] So spoke John Adams, founder and second President of the United States of America in 1781, after returning from his European travels. Did this mean that the other Founders of the United States were aware of this history and were the Dutch documents available to them before the start of the American Revolution? Without awareness and availability, the argument of a similarity between these foundational documents loses its strength.

Political scientist William H. Riker claims there was a "paucity of information about the Netherlands available to the members of the Philadelphia convention."[67] Although he admits that "[t]he records show that members of the [constitutional] conventions referred to the government of the United Provinces more frequently than to any other modern European government, except that of Great Britain," Riker claims that the Founders' knowledge of Dutch history was incomplete and often inaccurate.[68] Riker's view of availability and inaccuracy has been thoroughly refuted by historian and rhetorician Stephen E. Lucas' examination of the origins of the Declaration of Independence. Lucas argues that Jefferson likely did have several English translations of Dutch revolutionary history books at his disposal through the Library Company of Philadelphia, a structure adjacent to the location where the Second Continental Congress

66 Stephen E. Lucas, "The Rhetorical Ancestry of the Declaration of Independence," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 166.
67 William H. Riker, "Dutch and American Federalism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 18, no.4 (Oct 1957): 496.
68 William H. Riker, "Dutch and American Federalism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 18, no.4 (Oct 1957): 495.

was meeting.[69] Although Jefferson later claimed that "I turned to neither book nor pamphlet while writing [the Declaration]," Lucas finds that Jefferson's habit of doing thorough research would have made it unlikely for him to overlook the Dutch DOA when drafting the Declaration.[70]

The pro-British Prince of Orange, the stadtholder and commander of the Dutch army, begrudgingly acknowledged the influence of the DOA on the ADOI. On August 20, 1776 he wrote: "it is a parody of the document that our ancestors did publish against Philip II."[71] One cannot write a parody without having knowledge of the original. The Prince's letter has been argued to be a refutation of Dutch influence, yet this translation suggests otherwise.[72]

Awareness of Dutch revolutionary ideas was likely also transmitted indirectly through the descendants of Dutch settlers of New Netherland. As the ASNN had stipulated, the Dutch inhabitants of New Netherland were allowed to stay and retain their rights and customs after the colonies' surrender to the English. Historian John Wood Sweet shows that the upper echelon of revolutionary era New York was overwhelmingly of Dutch descent, including its mayor, Richard Varick.[73] Many prominent figures in the American Revolutionary Era were descendants of New Netherlanders: Richard Varick, as mayor of New York and codifier of New York State's first statutes, General Philip Schuyler, a general in the Revolutionary War and United States senator, the aforementioned Gouverneur Morris, Founding Father and "penman to the Constitution," and his half-brother Lewis, who was a signer of the Declaration of Independence.[74] These prominent Dutch Americans had retained many of their customs, and often still spoke Dutch in private, some as late as Martin van Buren (1782-1862), the only American president for whom English

69 Stephen E. Lucas, "The Rhetorical Ancestry of the Declaration of Independence," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 1, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 167.
70 ibid, 169.
71 F.J.L. Krämer, *Archives ou correspondance inédite de la maison d'Orange-Nassau*, (Leiden: A.W. Sijthoff, 1918), 449. "*Het is de parodie van het stuk, dat onze voorzaeten deeden uitgeeven tegens koning Philips de tweede".*
72 Emily Sneff, Hist 5700 Zoom guest speaker at Cal State LA. February 24, 2025.
73 John Wood Sweet, *The Sewing Girl's Tale: A Story of Crime and Consequences in Revolutionary America*, (Holt, 2022).
74 New Netherland Institute, *Dutch Americans*, https://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/history-and-heritage/dutch_americans

was his second language.[75]

Prominent Dutch Americans can thus be placed deep within the circle of the Founders, making them a part of the processes that established the United States in the eighteenth century. It is also reasonable to assume that these Dutch Americans, through language and tradition, were aware of the history of the Dutch Republic and its ideas, as transmitted via the colony of New Netherlands. They were readily on hand to transmit, interpret, and even translate these ideas, and were perhaps even in possession of some of these pertinent documents. The New Netherland Institute, housed in the New York State Library still has twelve thousand documents pertaining to New Netherland in its possession.[76] In the eighteenth century, this amount would have been much higher. Riker is correct in assuming that Jefferson was not able to read these Dutch language documents, but many of his Dutch American colleagues could. They could have also informed Jefferson through conversation and debate.

Availability and awareness is highly probable and gives strength to the thesis that the history of the Dutch Republic was a significant factor in the shaping of early U.S. history. Its ideas, transported both directly from the Dutch Republic through available documents and indirectly through the influence of prominent Dutch Americans, permeates the documents of the early United States. Moreover, admissions of the importance of Dutch history and its ideas can be found in the correspondence and memoirs of prominent Founders such as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. Even the ever sceptical Riker had to concede that "it appears that our heritage from the Netherlands is considerable."[77]

75 New Netherland Institute, *Dutch Americans*, https://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/history-and-heritage/dutch_americans_buren-martin-van

76 New Netherland Institute, *About the New Netherland Institute*, https://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/about-nni/about-the-nnrc

77 William H. Riker, "Dutch and American Federalism," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 18, no.4 (Oct 1957): 495.