

# *The American Dutch, Their Church, and the Revolution*

JAMES TANIS

**F**ROM the outset of the American Revolution, the British rightly realized that their hope for victory lay in dividing the northern colonies from the middle and southern colonies by controlling the Hudson River valley. Little could Henry Hudson have realized in 1609, as he sailed up the river that was to bear his name, that the Dutch who were to take up his claim would provide the backbone of resistance to the British cause 170 years later.

These middle colony Dutch—those who spoke the language, worshipped mostly in the Reformed Church, and exemplified the Dutch heritage in their homes and manners—were by no means limited to those of Netherlandish blood. Some, like the House of Orange itself, were German in origin; others were Swiss; some were French; and some had even come from Britain. A few were assimilated in the colonies; but most had "become Dutch" in the old country itself. A typical example was the boy Robert Livingston, who, with his family, migrated to Rotterdam from Scotland among a group of religious refugees at the time of the Stuart restoration. In 1673, having adopted the Dutch culture of his neighbors, nineteen-year-old Robert sailed for the New World, where he was to become one of the richest and most powerful men in New York. In Albany he married the widow Alida Schuyler van Rensselaer, and their offspring for generations were among the leaders of the Dutch community. The ancient Dutch hospitality to foreigners was a part of the cultural pattern that these "new Dutch" absorbed and brought with them to America.

The pivotal role of the Hudson Valley in American history became most powerfully clear in the 1750's, at the time of the French and Indian War. Archibald Kennedy, married to the widow of a Dutch settler, was an astute American political observer of the time. He noted

that "Hudson's River is the Center and Key of the Continent; it is the basis of all our trade and connections with our own and foreign Indians: And if ever we lose it, we may fairly bid adieu to the Whole."<sup>1</sup> His observations were not limited to the river valley but included its inhabitants, as he referred to the "brave Batavians, and united too, whose Ancestors have so gloriously distinguished themselves in History for their noble Exploits in Defence of their Liberties and Country."<sup>2</sup>

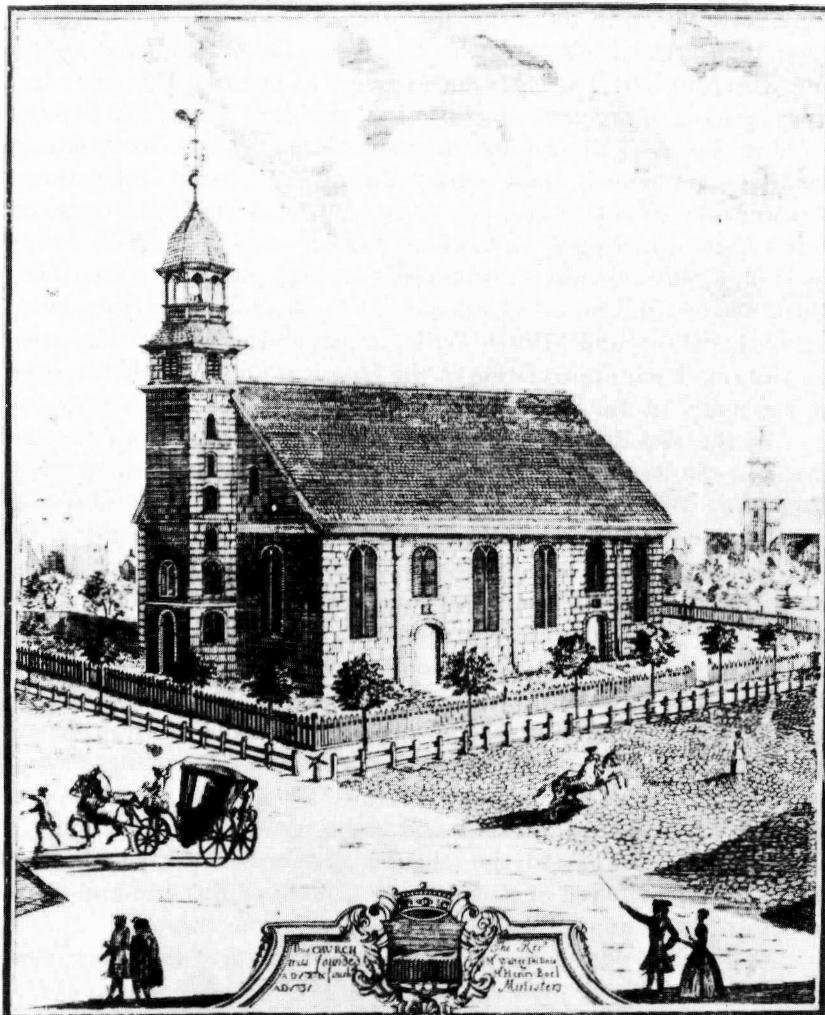
The Dutch example, which became an important symbol for the colonists at the time of the Albany Congress in 1754, embraced the two Willems—Willem the Silent, Prince of Orange and the George Washington of the Netherlands, and his great-grandson, Willem III of the Netherlands, King William III of Great Britain. The union achieved by the Dutch in the sixteenth century became a paradigm for American colonists in the eighteenth century. Though the ideas of union and independence may long have lain in the hearts and minds of many Dutch settlers in America, those ideas were first openly discussed among the English settlers during the decade of the French and Indian War. It was during that war and among the colonial clergy of the Reformed tradition that the rhetoric was forged that was later to serve so decisive a role in kindling and stirring the fires of revolution. At first the focus was on union. At the time of the Albany Congress, Jonathan Mayhew, pastor of Boston's West Church, sharpened the point for his congregation in a sermon preached on the anniversary of the election of His Majesty's council for the province. The enemy at that point, of course, was France—not England—but later the argument was easily adapted to Britain. "No one that is not an absolute stranger to [French] ambition, to their policy, to their injustice, to their perfidiousness, can be in any doubt what they aspire at. . . . Their late conduct may well alarm us; especially considering our disunion, or at least want of a sufficient bond of union, amongst ourselves; an inconvenience which, it is to be hoped, we shall not always labour under. And whenever all our scattered rays shall be drawn to a point and proper focus, they can scarce fail to consume and burn up these enemies of our peace, how faintly soever they may strike at present. What *union* can do, we need only look toward those Provinces, which are distinguished by the name of the *United*, to know."<sup>3</sup> Since the rhetoric was aimed at France, and at the Catholicism which France represented, the resultant appeal was not only to Willem the Silent and to the Dutchmen's war of independence but also to their prince, Willem III, who had saved both the Netherlands and England from the "wicked and ambitious designs" of Louis XIV. In 1755, in *A Discourse Delivered at New-Ark*, the evangelical Presbyterian pastor Aaron Burr noted that "divine Providence prevented their total Overthrow, which seemed inevitable, by sundry favourable Interpositions.

Heaven rais'd up at that time, the great Hero of the Day, King William, then Prince of Orange, who, by his singular Wisdom and Valour, put a stop to that Torrent, which seemed to threaten Europe."<sup>4</sup> In a 1755 sermon, *Religion and Patriotism*, the New Jersey Presbyterian Samuel Davies reminded his listeners of the ancient Anglo-French enmity—"the French, those eternal Enemies of Liberty and Britons." He went on to note that God, "even that same gracious Power, has formed and raised up . . . a William."<sup>5</sup> That same year an old sermon of Francis Makemie was reprinted with its high praise of William III.<sup>6</sup> Burr, Davies, Makemie—all evangelical Presbyterian neighbors of the Jersey Dutch—found "Dutch Willy" a valuable symbol of Reformed patriotism. Their appreciation of the House of Orange added strength to the image of the Dutch as forerunners of liberty and freedom.

In the two decades between the Albany Congress and the outbreak of the Revolution, however, the focus shifted increasingly away from King William III to Willem the Silent and from the Glorious Revolution of 1688 to the struggle for Dutch independence in the sixteenth century. The analogies had strong religious implications, though at first largely limited to anti-Catholic sentiments appropriate to the facts of the French and Indian War. During the same period, however, colonial efforts for a non-denominational college for New York resulted instead in an Anglican establishment, King's College, now Columbia University. From the outspoken objections of pietistic Dutch clergymen, a clear anti-Anglicanism emerged, reviving feelings that had flared up earlier in the century when Lord Cornbury had attempted to exert his influence and authority over the Dutch church. As the Revolution neared, the religious antagonisms shifted more and more from the Church of Rome to the Church of England and to the imagined threat of an American bishop and a state church.

Among the settlers of the middle colonies, there was much more to the religious issue than the specter of Anglicanism. There was an inherent struggle within the various churches of the Reformed tradition, between the revivalistic pietistic evangelicals who were to become revolutionary Whigs and the more staid and orderly orthodox who were to become loyalist Tories. Nowhere was this division more clear than among the Dutch Reformed, where its roots had early been articulated by the patriarch Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen. Indeed, it was his son Theodore who led the Albany Dutch against the establishment of King's College.

Early in the nineteenth century this division was most clearly set forth in *A Lamentation over the Rev. Solomon Froeligh*, recently deceased revivalist dominie and earlier an aggressive patriot leader: "There was between the two people [of Dutch New Jersey] the difference . . . of Whig and Tory during the American revolution, and,



To the Honourable  
**RIP VAN DAM, Esq.**  
PRESIDENT of His Majestys Council for the PROVINCE of NEW YORK  
This View of the New Dutch Church is most humbly  
Dedicated by your W<sup>m</sup> most Obedient Servt W<sup>m</sup> BURGIS

The New Dutch Church—engraving by William Burgis  
(active 1716-1731)

This church in Nassau Street was completed in 1731  
and torn down in 1882

(Courtesy of the Bryn Mawr College Library)

twenty-one years before the declaration of independence, there was the difference of *coetus* and *conferentie*. [The terms will be explained later.] But the trouble in the Dutch Church in America did not begin in 1755, although it raged then . . . ; it began 35 years before that. In 1720, in January, the Rev. Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen came to this country from Holland, and settled in the four Raritan [New Jersey] congregations. He was the first experimental Dutch preacher in this country. The commencement of faithful preaching was the source of blessings, and the signal for war. The dissention and rent began in his societies, and, as godly ministers increased, spread throughout the Dutch churches. Whatever the exterior form the dissention may have put on, the radical ground of the whole difference was, nature and grace, the kingdoms of darkness and of light, the children of God and of the devil, the friends or foes of the saving work of the Holy Ghost. These things have from the beginning divided men, and will divide between them for ever!"<sup>7</sup>

If, as this essay contends, the American Revolution was vitally affected by the support of pietistic Dutch Calvinists, particularly the clergy, the motivating ideas behind them form the crucial base for the contention. Behind the banners of "Liberty" and "Independence" were deeply held convictions concerning religious experimentalism with its emphasis on rebirth, millenarianism with its emphasis on the coming of the Kingdom in America, and holy living with its emphasis on introspection and judgment. It is from these fundamental ideas that the revolutionary theology of 1776 took shape—and not only the theology of the War of Independence but much of its political ideology as well.

Aspects of pietism's message had found earlier expression in New Netherland, but from the time Frelinghuysen arrived in 1720 until his death during the winter of 1747-48 he provided the focus and the leadership for the increasingly influential experimental pietists. In addition to his own five natural sons, he led a group of spiritual sons into a single-minded commitment to the rebirth of colonial America. Though directed most immediately to their own congregations, these enthusiastic dominies frequently itinerated, preaching their fiery gospel in other towns and villages. Antagonisms aroused were seen as marks of vitality, and controversies were viewed as signs of alertness. Frelinghuysen's impact was not limited to the Dutch Reformed either. His close friendship with the Presbyterian Gilbert Tennent led to numerous contacts among the Scots-Irish and English Presbyterians, influencing directly the course of revivalism among them. Even George Whitefield, the most famous evangelist in colonial America, visited Frelinghuysen and attested to his influence. Whitefield, a methodistic Calvinist clergyman of the Church of England, found the doors of the

American Anglican churches shut against him, though he was eagerly welcomed by evangelistic Calvinists in other colonial churches. Of his stay with Frelinghuysen and his associates in New Brunswick, New Jersey, Whitefield recorded in his journal: "To me the Meeting seemed to be like the Meeting of the Twelve Tribes, when they came from different Parts to worship the Lord at Jerusalem. Among others that came to hear the Word, were several Ministers whom the Lord had been pleased to honour, in making Instruments of bringing many Sons to Glory. One was a Dutch Calvinistical Minister, named Freeling Housen. . . . He is a worthy old Soldier of Jesus Christ, and was the Beginner of the great work . . . in these Parts. He has been strongly opposed by his carnal Brethren, but God has always appeared for him in a surprising Manner, and made him more than Conqueror, thro' his love. He has long since learnt to fear him only who can destroy both Body and Soul in Hell."<sup>8</sup>

Frelinghuysen was not alone in being opposed by carnal brethren. The clergy of the Great Awakening, as the tumultuous intercolonial revival of the 1740's was known, were generally opposed by those clergy in their own denominations who found their religious enthusiasm offensive and their experimental theology untenable. The traditionalists were troubled by their opponents' informalities of worship and by the liberties they took with the liturgy. The increasing role of the laity among the enthusiasts was also deplored. As the anti-enthusiasts became more vocal, the revivalists responded by finding them "wanting in true religion." Whitefield came to believe that the majority of Episcopal clergymen were unconverted. Gilbert Tennent blasted the churches with his sermon *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry*. Frelinghuysen mirrored his colleagues' sentiments and gave expression to his own Old World tradition when he cried: "Worthless, foolish pastors. Woe unto you, unfaithful watchmen."<sup>9</sup>

Frelinghuysen's diatribes were not reserved for the clergy. Indeed, his sermons regularly decried the lack of spirituality among his parishioners as well as among those outside of his congregation. One can well imagine the consternation of the elders who opposed him when they rosé to partake of the Lord's Supper only to be met by Frelinghuysen's wail: "Behold the swine approach the table." A studied categorizing of Christians, a methodology which placed the pastor in the role of judge, was a central belief among the exponents of experimental godliness. Excesses of judgmental Christianity soon divided those congregations shepherded by pietistic clergy of Frelinghuysen's stripe. And it proved a surprisingly short step from the pastors' judgmental role in dividing the regenerate from the unregenerate of the Great Awakening to their judgmental stance in assaying between the Whigs and the Tories of the Revolution. Nor was the

course of enthusiasm in New England far different from that of the middle colonies, though it was fed by slightly different rhetoric.

The Dutch Reformed in America were under the oversight of the Classis of Amsterdam. This bond was all the more significant because the Dutch churches of the middle colonies did not have the direct political interaction with the local government that marked the home churches. All theological and ecclesiastical problems had to be referred to the old country for resolution. All candidates for the ministry were expected to return to the Netherlands for final training and ordination. In all consequential matters, the Classis retained firm control, in spite of its lack of financial support. Given the hazards of sea travel and the great length of time required for even a letter to go from New York to Amsterdam and for its answer to be returned, life in the colonial churches was often difficult in the extreme. Frelinghuysen's disaffected parishioners, for example, first turned to pastors in New York City to plead their case. They in turn wrote to the Classis. Charges and countercharges were sent back and forth for years. An incalculable amount of time and energy was expended in this tripartite battling, energy that was desperately needed for upbuilding the churches in the wilderness of America. The Classis, too, was driven to frustration. It sought a plan from the churches "which might tend to promote the union of the Dutch churches . . . in doctrine and ecclesiastical business, according to the church-order, and the resolutions of Synod—but without impairing our correspondence—either by holding a yearly convention, or in such other way as you may think best."<sup>10</sup> A *coetus* was proposed. The *coetus* was to be an ecclesiastical body, subordinate to the Classis of Amsterdam, which in turn was subordinate to the Synod of North Holland. In the colonies, the *coetus* was to be given the power to ordain as well as to carry out certain routine matters for the local churches belonging to the body. The pietists welcomed this move as a step forward; but Frelinghuysen's longtime opponent, the conservative New York dominie Henricus Boel, led an opposition movement to the *coetus*. Again the Classis sought to adjudicate the matter from the other side of the sea. Ten years of tension and controversy passed before the first meeting of the *coetus* was finally held in September 1747—a few months before the death of the aged and ailing Frelinghuysen. Yet even Frelinghuysen's death scarcely created a lull in the storm. In a memorial note one of his former students wrote of him: "Numerous and fearful are the vicissitudes to be expected by the children of God. For comfort's sake, this is added."<sup>11</sup> It was cold comfort.

Boel's opposition to the *coetus* continued and his cohorts became known as the *conferentie*, considering themselves conferees of the Classis of Amsterdam. Boel, one who "warmed himself by the fire of



THE FICELI/GHUYSEK HOMESTEAD.

(TOP) The Repeal, or The Funeral of Miss Ame-Stamp—  
pro-American cartoon on the repeal of the Stamp Act,  
issued in London and Philadelphia. Typical of  
the shift from anti-Catholic to anti-Anglican sentiment  
(Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia)

(BOTTOM) The Freylinghuysen Homestead—  
engraving made about 1750  
(Courtesy of the Bryn Mawr College Library)

controversy," led the *conferentie* until his death in 1754, when his small but determined group of followers took over. In the meantime, the Classis of Amsterdam withdrew its earlier permission to examine and ordain students for the ministry. This led to new confusions, so the *coetus* went over the head of the Classis of Amsterdam and proposed to the Synods of North Holland and South Holland that the charter be amended so that the *coetus* might become a classis with the clear right to ordain.

At the same time the *coetus* controversy raged, the college issue mentioned earlier came to a head. The proposed non-denominational college of New York was being created as an Episcopal establishment, in spite of the fact that "nine-tenths of the population were non-Episcopal." In arguing for its non-denominational character against "so pernicious a Scheme" as the one proposed by the Episcopalians, William Livingston, grandson of patriarch Robert and a very active Reformed layman, again claimed the heritage of William III. "In the Reign of King James II of arbitrary and papistical Memory, a Project jesuitically artful, was concerted to poison the Nation, by rilling the Universities with popish-affected Tutors; and but for our glorious Deliverance, by the immortal William, the Scheme had been sufficient, in Process of Time, to have introduced and established, the sanguinary and anti-Christian Church of Rome."<sup>12</sup> In a circular letter he appealed to "the Dutch Church": "Gentlemen of the Dutch Church . . . tracé the Renown of your Progenitors, recollect their Stand, their glorious and ever memorable Stand against the Yoke of Thraldom, and all the horrors of ecclesiastic Villainy, its inseparable Concomitants. . . . Impell'd by their illustrious Example, disdain the Thoughts of a servile Acquiescence in the usurped Dominion of others, who will inevitably swallow up and absorb your Churches."<sup>13</sup>

The conservative Dutch clergy of New York ignored their fellow layman's appeal and petitioned for a chair of Reformed theology in this "Party-College," but their plan aroused even the ire of their own congregation. The pietistic clergy, meanwhile, were working to establish a Dutch Reformed college in New Jersey. Dominie Theodore Frelinghuysen of Albany took the lead by visiting the individual churches, seeking support for both the college and the American classis. In 1755 a meeting of the *coetus* was held in New York, largely attended by those sympathetic to the movement for a college and a classis. Those attending voted to restructure themselves as a classis and proceeded to assume the rights and prerogatives of a classis. Frelinghuysen was chosen as their delegate to take the matter to the Netherlands. The opposition wrote quickly to the Classis of Amsterdam, which replied to the erstwhile *coetus* leaders: "How many are the wretched troubles and the soul-destroying discords which afflict

unhappy New York! . . . Instead of the old quarrels being healed, new ones are continually arising."<sup>14</sup> In spite of the strong opposition from Amsterdam to both the idea of an American classis and the suggestion of a Dutch university in the colonies, Frelinghuysen sailed for the Netherlands in 1759, hoping to gain Dutch backing for the plan. So completely was he identified with the project that his opponents called it "Frelinghuysen's Academy." He was coolly received in the Netherlands and his efforts were to no avail. His death on the return voyage to New York foreclosed the possibility of his seeing the realization of his dream. In 1766, however, the American classis which he had done so much to create received a charter for Queen's College, now Rutgers University, in New Jersey. The Dutch could now have a college in which to train the young clergy the American classis was to ordain.

The division between the still-entitled *coetus* and *conferentie* factions continued until healed on paper in 1771 by the mediation of Dominie John H. Livingston, Dutch Reformed pastor and cousin of the eloquent lawyer and patriot politician William Livingston. In 1766, after completing college at Yale, John Livingston had sailed to the Netherlands, the last colonial American Dutch Reformed student to return to the mother country for further education and ordination. He attended lectures at the University of Utrecht and made numerous friends in the Dutch church. When he returned to New York in 1771, he brought with him a proposal from the Synod of North Holland for a plan of union between the factions, which now included thirty-four clergymen. General agreement was reached and the document was sent to the Netherlands for final approval. On June 16, 1772, the American classis reassembled to hear the letter of approval read. The American church of the Dutch Reformed was independent at last, tied to the homeland by the formality of sending back annual minutes of their general body. Though peace was welcomed in the church at large, embers of enduring antagonism remained, waiting only for the next wind to bring them to flame again. That wind was to come all too soon, this time in political guise—the Declaration of Independence and the seven years of revolution which followed.

When the war erupted in 1776, the clergy of the former *coetus* faction were solidly on the side of the Whigs; indeed, many became deeply involved in the day-to-day activities of the Revolution. The Whigs also drew strength from those pastors who had been neutral in the *coetus-conferentie* struggle, as well as those men who had come into the church since the Union of 1772. On the other hand, the four most committed Tory pastors had been leaders of the *conferentie* movement and at least three other former *conferentie* pastors were Tory-inclined neutrals.

Most of the *coetus* clergy had been trained by followers of old

Dominie Frelinghuysen. Pre-eminent among those teachers were John Henry Goetschius and Frelinghuysen's son John. John died in 1754 at the young age of twenty-seven, but not before training his successor, and later patriot leader, Jacob Rutsen Hardenbergh. Goetschius lived until 1774, having trained several young ministerial students and having shared actively with Hardenbergh in the movement to establish Queen's College. At its founding, Goetschius became one of its first trustees and Hardenbergh its first president.

Goetschius' pupils, foremost among them Dominies Dirck Romeyn and Johannes Leydt, were joined by Dominie Hardenbergh in providing leadership to the Whig pastors in the Dutch churches and in direct personal involvement in the Revolution itself. Hardenbergh had also been active in the Provincial Congress leading up to the Declaration of Independence. He helped draft the constitution of the state of New Jersey. Indeed Hardenbergh's involvement prompted the British to place a bounty of one hundred pounds on his head. Romeyn, too, dubbed "the Rebel Parson," had a price on his head. Among his many patriotic activities, Romeyn provided an indispensable chain of intelligence reports for Washington and other Revolutionary officers. Though much could be said about the individual exploits of the Dutch Whig pastors, and much too of their Whig parishioners, the essential point was best summed up by a member of the opposition, one of the Tory printers: "The people in the Jerseys . . . were quite tired of their democratic tyranny, and that he [believed] the people in general would embrace reconciliation but for the inflammatory exclamations and instigations of their preachers."<sup>15</sup> Troops were often raised in the course of a fiery sermon.

In the middle ground of New Jersey and New York, it was the Reformed clergy, Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed, who provided much of the commitment and the dynamism that were essential in holding the critical Hudson Valley from British control. Another Tory wrote to Lord Dartmouth: "The war is at the bottom a religious war." This view was attested to by Dominie John Livingston in a letter written at the war's end: "The common enemy to our religious liberties is now removed; and we have nothihg to fear from the pride and domination of the Episcopal Hierarchy."<sup>16</sup> Calvinist theology, which had become the spring of personal regeneration in the hands of the rebirth theologians, became the theology of political freedom and liberation for the patriots of the Revolution. Typical is the fact that the sole surviving male Frelinghuysen, old Dominie Frelinghuysen's grandson Frederick, served before the war in the Provincial Congress, during the war in the Continental Congress and as an officer in the Revolutionary forces, and after the war as a senator in the United States Congress and a major general in the militia. Such were the

heirs of awakening theology and of that Dutch Calvinism which brought war to the Netherlands in the sixteenth century and to America two hundred years later.

## NOTES

- 1 Archibald Kennedy, *Serious Advice to the Inhabitants of the Northern-Colonies* (New York, 1755), p. 17.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 3 Jonathan Mayhew, *A Sermon Preach'd in the Audience of His Excellency William Shirley* (Boston, 1754), pp. 34-35.
- 4 Aaron Burr, *A Discourse Delivered at New-Ark* (New York, 1755), pp. 8-9.
- 5 Samuel Davies, *Religion and Patriotism the Constituents of a Good Soldier* (Philadelphia, 1755), pp. 3, 9.
- 6 Francis Makemie, *A Narrative of a New and Unusual American Imprisonment* (New York, 1755). This pamphlet was edited by William Livingston, who is mentioned in detail later in this study.
- 7 Cornelius T. Demarest, *A Lamentation over the Rev. Solomon Froeligh* (New York, 1827), p. 61.
- 8 George Whitefield, *A Continuation of the . . . Journal* [no. 5] (2nd ed.; London, 1740), p. 41.
- 9 Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen, *Sermons* (New York, 1856), p. 373.
- 10 *Ecclesiastical Records [of the] State of New York* (Albany, 1901-19), p. 2664.
- 11 Frelinghuysen, *Sermons*, p. 342.
- 12 *Ecclesiastical Records*, p. 3339.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 3367.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 3656.
- 15 Cited in Adrian C. Leiby, *The Revolutionary War in the Hackensack Valley: The Jersey Dutch and the Neutral Ground* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1962), p. 49.
- 16 Alexander Gunn, *Memoirs of the Rev. John H. Livingston* (New York, 1829), p. 258.

*Exodus Netherlands,  
Promised Land America*

Dutch Immigration and  
Settlement in the  
United States

ROBERT P. SWIERENGA

*Magnitude of Immigration*

DUTCH settlement in North America antedates that of almost every other European nation, except the English; it spans three and a half centuries. Yet despite the lengthy time span, Dutch non-immigration rather than immigration is the salient fact.<sup>1</sup> For one of the most densely populated and land-starved nations of Europe, it is remarkable that less than 300,000 Netherlanders emigrated overseas from 1820 to 1920 (Table 1).<sup>2</sup> Dutch labor, as one scholar remarked, "showed little inclination toward long and adventurous voyages."<sup>3</sup> The proverbial Dutch attachment to family, faith, and fatherland outweighed the appeal of overseas utopias.

Among European nations, the Dutch ranked only tenth in the proportion of their population that emigrated overseas in the nineteenth century (Table 2), and in the United States in 1900 they ranked a lowly seventeenth among foreign-born groups. There are today an estimated 3 million persons of Dutch birth or ancestry in the States, or a little more than 1 percent of the population.<sup>4</sup> This proportion is considerably smaller than at the birth of the new nation, when Dutch Americans, 80,000 strong, numbered nearly 3.5 percent of the populace.

Unlike other Western European nations in the nineteenth century, the Dutch never contracted "America fever." While its influence