



PILOT LOG 2002

Kingston's 350th Anniversary 1652-2002

What Might Have Been

By Edwin M Ford, President, Friends of Historic Kingston

Much has already been publicized about the origin of the settlement of Esopus (now Kingston). On June 5th of 1652, Thomas Chambers of Rensselaerswyck, signed a deed with the local Esopus band of Indians to acquire 76 acres of land bordering the Esopus Creek in the vicinity of what is now Uptown, Kingston, New York. Chambers had been living for some years as a tenant farmer on the estate of Killian Van Rensselaer at Fort Orange (now Albany, New York). Discontented with the restrictive regulations of Patroon Van Rensselaer's contract, Chambers and five others of predominately Dutch heritage, petitioned Peter Stuyvesant, Director-General of the New Netherland Company to permit them to leave the estate and live wherever they wished in the Hudson Valley. Stuyvesant granted their request paving the way for the group to purchase land from the Indians. The Esopus Creek in this area had flooded frequently over many years creating a treeless fertile plain on which the Esopus Indians were growing corn and beans. Here the settlers built small wooden houses upon the land beginning the community of Esopus, later to be called Wiltwyck and finally Kingston.

What if circumstances had been different? Let's speculate.

Henry Hudson, An Englishman was employed in 1607 by the Muscovy Company to carry on trade with Russia. His first voyage was undertaken to discover a passage by the North Pole to Japan and China. Hudson failed because of the ice barrier in the Arctic Ocean but his reports began a new industry—whaling—which thrived thereafter.

In 1608 his second voyage for the Muscovy Company took him past Spitzbergen to Nova Zembla in the Arctic Ocean. But he found no passage. He did, however, become known as one of the most courageous and knowledgeable navigators of his time.

France, England and Holland vied for his services for another voyage. No one knows why but he signed a contract with the Dutch East India Company in January of 1609. He was ordered to proceed to Nova Zembla but found the sea full of ice. Against his contract he then reached Newfoundland and explored the coast of America as far south as the Chesapeake Bay. Turning north, he entered what is now New York Bay on September 2, 1609 and proceeded up the river, that today bears his name. He ventured as far as what is now Cohoes, New York at the confluence of the Mohawk River.

In the same year, 1609, French explorer Samuel de Champlain discovered and explored the lake that bears his name. Champlain allied himself with the wrong side in an Indian War and made mortal enemies of the Iroquois. This halted any French exploratory advancement south into the Hudson Valley. If the French had done differently would we have had their influence on our culture and architecture instead of the Dutch?

The second "what might have been" takes us to 1830 and the block of Wall Street between John Street and North Front Street in Uptown Kingston. Joseph S. Smith was an enterprising young man who in 1817 at the age of 17 contracted to carry the mail on horseback from Kingston to Delhi and the Susquehanna River.

He traveled 40 miles per day for three years accumulating a total of over 35,000 miles. In 1824 he came to Kingston and with borrowed capital opened a general store on the corner of John Street and East Front Street (now named Clinton Avenue). After being defeated twice in his project, with a liberal contribution of his own, he succeeded in 1828 in obtaining enough money by subscription to purchase the land to extend Wall Street from John Street to North Front Street. The construction of grading for the street cost \$45.00. Smith then erected three commercial buildings near North Front Street.

Why would it take 170 years from 1658 to 1828 to make what appears to be an obvious extension of Wall Street? Apparently the land had been owned for generations by families of means who neither needed the money or desired to have a street placed through their backyards. Had this block not been commercially developed business expansion might have occurred on Crown or Green Streets obliterating many or all of our early Dutch colonial stone houses.

In 1885 the first train on the West shore of the Hudson River steamed through Kingston. Since a railroad had existed on the eastern shore from about 1850, train service on the western side with both passenger and freight stations was most welcome here in Kingston. The initial proposal was to lay the tracks at a low level close to the Hudson River, all the way from Weehauken, New Jersey to Albany. Here at Kingston, this would have necessitated a drawbridge across the Rondout Creek near Kingston Point. Local shipping magnate, Thomas Cornell, would not have appreciated such a hindrance to his shipping interests as delays would be costly. By 1870, possibly in anticipation, Cornell owned considerable property in the central part of Kingston where Thomas Street and Cornell Street are now located. Industry needing rail service sprang up in this area and several hotels were built to accommodate customers.

Had the railroad been built on the shore as possibly planned, Midtown and Downtown Kingston would have been completely different. Industrial development might have located on the Rondout Creek near the West Shore Railroad and Central Kingston would have a larger residential growth.

Small decisions made at an earlier time turn out to cause momentous happenings later on. This is "what might have been" as we discuss our 350th anniversary celebration.