



Friends of Historic New Utrecht

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Immediate Release

Evacuation Day: the 222nd Anniversary of the Liberty Pole

Although the [Friends of Historic New Utrecht](#), the [New Utrecht Liberty Pole Association](#) and the [New Utrecht Reformed Church](#) commemorate the Liberty Pole on Liberty Weekend each June, these three organizations also sponsored an interfaith service on Evacuation Day each November 25 with a flag-raising ceremony at the Liberty Pole. Both the service and ceremony were canceled this year because the church sanctuary has remained closed since December 2003. November 25, 2005 marks the 222nd anniversary of the evacuation and the erecting of the first Liberty Pole. The Friends need to raise \$700,000 to begin repairs on both the roof and bell tower. The cost has been estimated at nearly \$2 million.

The New Utrecht Reformed Church, a member of the mainline [Reformed Church in America \(RCA\)](#), was founded in 1677. Its minister is the Rev. Terry Troia of Staten Island. Rev. Troia also is executive director of [Project Hospitality](#), which serves the needy.

More information is available at (718) 256-7173 and (718) 234-9268. The Friends Web site is www.historicnewutrecht.org. Contributions toward restoring the church may be sent to Friends of Historic New Utrecht, 1831 84th St., Brooklyn, N.Y. 11214. Tax-deductible checks can be made out to the Friends of Historic New Utrecht Restoration Fund.

An historic account of Evacuation Day and the New Utrecht Liberty Pole follows.

HISTORIC ACCOUNT OF THE NEW UTRECHT LIBERTY POLE

When the last British troops boarded their ships and sailed out of New York Bay, in early December 1783, the inhabitants of southwest Brooklyn, known then as the Town of New Utrecht, realized that the war was over at last and that they had won in their struggle for Liberty. Freedom at long last was theirs.

Evacuation Day, when British troops withdrew from the thirteen colonies on November 25, 1783 at the end of the Revolutionary War, was celebrated as a holiday long before the Fourth of July. Great was the rejoicing and to symbolize their liberation a Liberty Pole was erected on the site of the present New Utrecht Reformed Church and the Flag of the New Republic was hoisted to the top; not the flag we know today, but the "Betsy Ross" flag with its 13 stars and 13 stripes.

The record of the first pole is somewhat incomplete; therefore any account must be based largely upon a compilation from published accounts of other data describing similar occurrences. The origin of Liberty Poles dates from the peace celebrations that were made popular events upon the evacuation by the British forces of the State of New York on November 25, 1783. In a book entitled "Revolutionary Incidents of Queens County," by Mr. Henry Onderdonk Jr., published in 1846, the following account appears, being an extract from the "Independent Gazette," dated December 13, 1783: "On Monday last the glorious event of peace was celebrated by the Whig inhabitants of Queens County at Jamaica. At sunrise, a volley was fired by the Continental Troops stationed in the town, and the thirteen stripes displayed on a Liberty Pole which had been erected for the purpose. At four o'clock, a number of the gentleman of the county, and officers of the army who were in the neighborhood, set down to an elegant dinner, attended by the music of a most excellent band, after drinking thirteen toasts, the gentleman marched in column, thirteen abreast in procession through the village, preceded by the music and saluting the colors as they passed. In the evening every house in the village, and for several miles around, was most brilliantly illuminated, and a ball given to the ladies concluded the whole. Celebrations of like character were held in many parts of the country." As far as can be learned such a celebration accompanied the erection of the first Liberty Pole and the unfurling of the national emblem in the old town of New Utrecht, and it can be stated with pride that the pole now standing on the lawn in front of the New Utrecht Reformed Church, on Eighteenth Avenue, is the only one left on Long Island, New York State or the original thirteen States of the republic. Standing in the same spot at that time Nov 25, 1783 at the end of Main Street (now 84 Street) and New Utrecht Lane (now 18th Ave.), stood the Liberty Pole. Later the Church would purchase the grounds that were once owned by them. In 1828 they took down the old Church on 84th Street and 16th Avenue and rebuilt the new church behind the old flag pole using the stones from the old church.

Again only seven years after the pole and flag were raised, on Tuesday, April 20, 1790, the pupils of the little school standing near the old Church could look out the window, and coming along Main Street they saw a grand coach with four horses and riders. They were at once thrilled with the thought that there comes the father of their country. The coach passed, and stopped at the house of Mr. William Barre, where

Washington dined. At the very moment he went out of sight of the children scampered, in all directions, for home, to have their hands and faces scrubbed, their clothes changed, and their hair neatly brushed, and came back with faces shining, so that when Washington returned and stepped in front of the old school house all the children were waiting for him outside. He laid his hand upon one boy's head and said: "If you are a good boy, you will grow up to be a great and good man." That boy was little Peter Van Pelt, who did grow up to be a good and great man. In February 1800, Peter, while still a divinity student, delivered at the Flatbush Reformed Church a noted oration on Washington's death, which ended with the words: "Teach your children and your children's children the unrivaled character of Washington, great in war, great in peace. And they, like us, will drop an admiring tear upon the Urn of our departed Hero." Peter entered the ministry in 1802 and achieved fame throughout the country.

The second Liberty Pole was erected on January 1, 1834. The address of the occasion was delivered by Mr. John Van Nuyse of New Utrecht. Thirteen men, holding each other's hands, danced around the pole singing patriotic songs, and the ceremonies were participated in by soldiers and people with general rejoicing. A cannon fired; a ball in the evening was attended by the representative men and women of the town. The flag was unrolled on this occasion and was made by the ladies of the town of New Utrecht as was the first flag of thirteen stars and thirteen stripes.

There is an account of the second New Utrecht Liberty Pole which is a complete copy of the original minutes of the town meeting held at the house of Michael Hegeman, on Saturday evening, Oct 19, 1833. Nicholas H. Van Brunt was called to the chair.

The observance of the third Liberty Pole was similar in character to that which marked the advent of the two former poles. The school children were dismissed and their elders assembled on the green. The third Liberty Pole was the indefatigable efforts and patriotism of Mr. Rulef Van Brunt of Bay Ridge, and Mr. William J. Cropsey, of Fort Hamilton. It was erected in May 1867.

This pole was re-set May 1899 by the descendants of those by whom it was originally erected. This occasion was appropriately observed by a popular demonstration and unfurling of a new flag.

For many years Mr. and Mrs. T.C. Van Pelt had been the leading spirits in the Liberty Pole preservation movement. For over a quarter of a century Mr. and Mrs. Townsend C. Van Pelt have tended to the pole, keeping the flag, seeing that it was hoisted upon the pole on all public holidays and tending to the necessary repairs. It is to their patriotism that we owe the preservation of this landmark. The New Utrecht Liberty Pole Association was organized in the parlor of the Van Pelt Manor and incorporated in 1908.

The fourth Liberty Pole was erected September 10, 1910 and presented by Townsend Cortelyou Van Pelt and his wife Maria Elizabeth Ditmars Van Pelt.

With the organizing of [Boy Scout Troop 20](#) in January 1910, the Boy Scouts became part of the celebration and flag raising on November 25, 1910 at the erecting celebration of the fourth pole. The Boy Scout troop has served during the formal flag raising celebrations on the raising of the fourth, fifth and sixth Liberty Poles. They have also served through the years helping to raise the flag on public holidays and serving as color guard. On July 14, 1936 the fourth pole was struck by lightning and badly damaged. On November 25th of that year exercises were held in celebration of the erection of the

fifth pole. In the fall of 1945 the present Liberty Pole, 106 feet high, was erected. It is the first metal pole, and formerly stood on the grounds of the 1939-40 World's Fair.

The last accounting of the original flags of thirteen stars and thirteen stripes that waved in the town in 1783 had been enshrined in the home and family of Mr. Robert Benson; it was handed down in his family. It was at the third Liberty pole ceremonies 1899 that the flag was last seen.

1834 the flag of twenty four states was raised on the new pole.

In 1867 the third pole was raised with a flag of thirty seven stars. A flag of forty five stars was raised in 1899. Later flags of forty eight and presently fifty stars were raised atop the Liberty Pole.

On top of the New Utrecht Liberty Pole, is an ancient eagle and weather vane, spelling Liberty. We are told it is the original eagle and vane which topped the first pole. The eagle is made of wood and measures five feet from wing to wing. Wind and weather have weakened it considerably, and it has been strengthened by iron bands on the wings and iron bill and legs. Nobody knows where the eagle came from or who made it. The eagle has seen storms of two hundred and twenty-two winters, it has seen the flowers of two hundred and twenty-two summers; it has seen the events and history of our country. It has seen many new immigrants who have come to seek freedom to live and pray without fear of persecutions. When it was first raised, the old stage coach came along this road, and then the West End railroad passed by before it was elevated, then the trolley cars, and today the 18th Ave. bus.

The eagle has looked over the bay and seen many sailing vessels, steamships and war ships. It has been said that the eyes of this golden eagle has looked upon more change in the world's history than occurred from the days of Nebuchadnezzar to the day when the eagle was raised.

In the last five years the Brooklyn Columbus Parade ended with the final ceremony at the Liberty Pole with both the Italian and American flags. The Friends of Historic New Utrecht uses the Liberty Pole in school tours to teach students about the American flag as part of its programs.