

Paving Stone Street:

Tracing the Public Financial Beginnings of New York City's Public Infrastructure and Understanding Its Economic and Cultural Importance Today

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I have spent the better part of the past twenty years living within a ten-minute walk of Stone Street in New York City, where in 1643 my ancestor, Isaack de Forest, settled. It is only recently, however, that I have realized the importance of Stone Street, originally Brouwer Straet, in New York City's development. The paving of Stone Street in 1658 marks the beginnings of a public commitment to the city's infrastructure. As New Amsterdam's first paved street, Stone Street represents a significant symbol for preserving urban America's public lands and environment. This essay will discuss the importance and benefit of understanding and incorporating into present-day urban investment strategy the cultural and public-spirited values of New Amsterdam's residents who lived on Stone Street between Whitehall and Broad streets, with a particular focus on their willingness to pay special assessments to meet their public improvement needs.

Andrew S. Dolkart's statement in *Lower Manhattan Architectural Survey Report* that the only man-made physical feature of colonial New York's landscape not left to the imagination is its publicly-owned street patterns brings to life their cultural importance today.

There is, however, one aspect of the Dutch colony that is often overlooked, but miraculously does survive. This is the original seventeenth-century street pattern of the colony which extended from the Battery North to Wall Street and along the original shorelines at Pearl Street, State Street, and Greenwich Street. The tall office buildings of the modern financial capital of America are set along the narrow streets of the small colonial settlement.¹

New Amsterdam's street pattern did not follow a preconceived plan of rigidly-imposed patterns or grids, as was the case for many cities established in the early stages of the development of North America. Local geography, both natural and cultural, and the need for defense against Native American tribes and other European powers dictated the laying out of private and public spaces. The town was thus an appendage to Fort Amsterdam. The Native American Weckquaesgeck Trail became Broadway and extended all the way to Dobbs Ferry. Some streets needed bridges to cross such as the natural inlet, now Broad Street, which the Dutch made into a canal.²

New Amsterdam's streets have survived, and these publicly owned lands are still in use, with their layout quite different from that of the rectangular grid imposed in 1811 by the Commissioners Plan which now characterizes most of Manhattan Island, with the exception of Greenwich Village and parts of Tribeca.

Present-day Stone Street incorporates two early seventeenth-century streets, Breurs Straet, also Straet van de Graft, and Brouwer Straet between Whitehall and Broad streets. The southern portion of Stone Street between Broad and William streets was closed and demapped by the Board of Estimate in 1980.³ This portion of Stone Street is now occupied by the building at 85 Broad Street. The "old path" of Stone Street is "mapped" by special paving in the lobby of the new building. This capture of public lands during the tenure of Mayor Edward I. Koch, which had been in the public domain for over 355 years, led to such a public outcry that the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission declared on February 10, 1983, the street plan of New Amsterdam and colonial New York a landmark site.

As "reinventing New York" has become a popular slogan for the need to transform the existing economic and social base of New York City and draw upon its strengths in specialized manufacturing, financial and service industries, and tourism and cultural resources,⁴ how important it is to preserve and reinvent what made New York unique. Cultural enterprise in the form of signs and directions explaining significant historical events and people in relation to a particular location generates interest and excitement invaluable as a supplement to increased lighting, paving, and planting, and other "security measures." Historical preservation enhances urban settlements and creates economic values. Integrated local investment in infrastructure in the form of water supply, transportation, and tourist-related cultural enterprise is unquestionably necessary to generate New York City's continued economic and cultural growth, enabling it to compete in the next century's global economy. An example for doing this can be drawn, in part, upon the civic traditions set by the city's founders nearly four centuries ago.

Special assessments, employed by the first residents

¹ Andrew S. Dolkart, *Lower Manhattan Architectural Survey Report* (New York, 1990), 3.

² Paul Goodman, *Comunitas: Means of Livelihood and Ways of Life* (New York, 1960), 39-43.

³ New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission; *Street Plan of New Amsterdam and Colonial New York* (New York, 1983), 11.

⁴ O'Neill and Moss, *Reinventing New York* (New York, 1992), 6-8.

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of New Amsterdam for the paving of Stone Street, are such a precedent. Special assessments are an ancient method of financing public improvements, as evidenced by the use of the theory of special assessment in Roman law, which developed during the thirteenth century. It was increasingly applied as a financing tool by our nation's growing cities for urban development. The ordinances of New Amsterdam were patterned after the laws of Holland which drew considerable influence from the Roman code of Justinian and are referred to as Roman-Dutch law. Thus, special assessments, with its inherent direct cost and benefit relationship, has withstood the test of time, passing from country to country, generation to generation. The use of special assessments is a proven means, or important dimension, to keeping cities alive as safe, clean, profitable, and vital centers of economic and cultural activity.⁵

The paving of Stone Street should be set in the context of its milieu. The West India Company's original intent for New Amsterdam was to be dependent on its own agriculture and to trade in furs. Thirty families, mostly Walloons brought to New Netherland through the instigation of Jesse de Forest by the Dutch West India Company, first settled New Amsterdam in 1624. European manufactured goods were to be sold to the Native Americans and to the European farmers in the Hudson River Valley, in Connecticut, and on Long Island. The bulk of the population was made up of agricultural workers, fishermen, soldiers, small farmers, sailors, and urban craftsmen. Large manufacturing spaces were not needed, as the only manufacturing allowed by law was for local consumption — tobacco houses or breweries, for example.⁶

New Amsterdam's population in the mid-seventeenth century is estimated to have been about 1,170 people. The

population was made up of diverse ethnic and religious groups. In 1643, eighteen languages were spoken, including the Native American Algonquin and Iroquoian. Most residents of the city were not of Dutch origin. The ethnic composition was 40 percent Dutch, 19 percent German, 15 percent English, 7 percent Scandinavian, 7 percent African, 5 percent Flemish and Walloon, 5 percent French, and 2 percent Jewish, Native American and others.⁷

By the 1650s, the increase in New Amsterdam's population created such an administrative burden to Director General Petrus Stuyvesant's council that a municipal government was formed.⁸ The establishment in 1653 of the right to self-government for the residents of New Amsterdam by city charter was centered on the protection of life and property. The function of the newly formed municipality was to provide adequate police, fire protection, water supply, and a guarantee of property rights.⁹ New Amsterdam's residents patterned their civic tradition along the lines of the Dutch cities of Holland. Dutch burgher life was recreated in which a small, self-perpetuating group of families invested their wealth for the benefit of the community and controlled civic activity.

Dutch families usually intermarried and believed it to

⁵ Douglas R. Porter, et al., *Special Districts A Useful Technique for Financing Infrastructure* (Washington, D.C., 1992), 25-40.

⁶ Howard P. Chudacoff, *The Evolution of American Urban Society* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1981), 2.

⁷ New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Street Plan*, 6.

⁸ Charles T. Gehring, "The Settlements of New Netherland." (Unpublished manuscript, 1992), 12.

⁹ Jacob Judd and Irwin H. Polishook, eds., *Aspects of Early New York Society and Politics* (Tarrytown, N.Y., 1974), 29-50; Michael Kammen, *Colonial New York: A History* (New York, 1975), 48-72.



Petrus Stuyvesant and his council preparing the charter for the City of New York in 1652. This 1879 engraving by A.G. Lund is purported to be based on a 1663 painting.

be their civic duty to have relatives occupy a public office. It was the Dutch custom to have a board of schepens or magistrates sitting on a town council and a court of justice making local ordinances. Urban communities distinguished between “great burghers” and “small burghers,” with the former required to pay a larger fee to obtain eligibility to sit on the town council. A smaller fee allowed the small burgher to do business in the town as a merchant.¹⁰

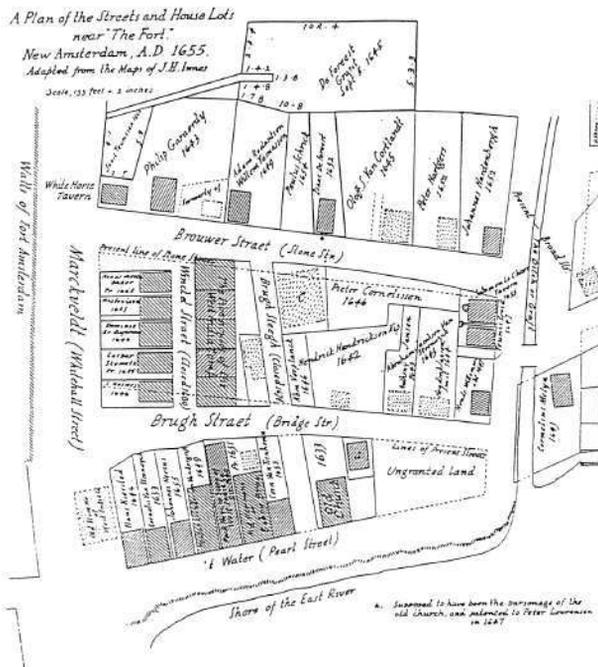
Stone Street originally began its westerly base by intersecting the public market, *het Marckvelt*, next to Fort Amsterdam, which stood on the site of the present-day U.S. Custom House and soon to house the American Indian Museum. The houses on Stone Street, one of the thirty streets that were part of the street plan of New Amsterdam, were among the 120 houses described in an 1656 survey by Jacques Cortelyou.¹¹

Shortly after the 1653 establishment of the municipal government, the denizens of Brouwer Straet, later Stone Street, included a tavern and families who were tied to the brewery business. The White Horse Tavern, owned by Philip Gerardy, was on the corner of today’s Whitehall and Stone streets.¹² Also, we find residents whose family names were destined to be part of New York City’s public history, such as Isaack de Forest who built a house next to the brewery of Oloff Van Cortlandt. Across the canal that runs down Broad Street was the governmental center of the colony, or the City Hall, known as the *Stadt Huys*, originally established as the West India Company’s tavern to accommodate travelers.¹³ Most of the houses were built with a brick gable end toward the street and the rest of the walls made of planks. The street doors were generally in the middle of the houses, and during fair weather, most people spent the whole day on seats in front of the house.¹⁴

In following the Dutch tradition, we find the residents of Brouwer Straet creating an emerging urban oligarchy. Oloff Stevensen Van Cortlandt became in 1648 one of the “Nine Men,” forerunner of the present-day City Council, and between 1655 to 1660 was burgomaster and mayor of New Amsterdam. He had arrived in New Amsterdam in 1637 as a soldier in the employ of the Dutch West India Company and later was to become a wealthy merchant and landowner. Director Kieft made him superintendent of cargo at the port. In 1641 he married Anneka, sister of Govert Looekermans, the colony’s leading merchant and Indian trader.¹⁵

Isaack de Forest was the son of Jesse de Forest, a wool merchant from Avesnes who had fled to Leiden as a protestant refugee and organized the fifty-six heads of other religious refugee families who wished to settle in the New World. De Forest’s efforts resulted in the Dutch West India Company sending this group to establish New Amsterdam in 1624.¹⁶ Isaack was a successful brewer and tobacco farmer, with a brewery on Beaver Street called the Red Lion Brewery. He built houses for other residents, lent money to his neighbors, and in 1652 became one of the “Nine Men” of New Amsterdam, as well as a great burgher and schepen a few years later. Through an appointment of Petrus Stuyvesant, his other public office was “Master of the Weigh House,” whose purpose was to weigh and measure goods and collect a fee from its building along the port’s edge. In 1660 he was named collector of tavern excise tax revenues, acting much like the present-day finance commissioner.¹⁷

Captain Willem Tomassen lived in New Netherland prior



Property owners of Brouwer Straet, 1655.

to 1643 and was skipper of the *Great Gerrit*, a ship that traded with Amsterdam. Tomassen was appointed by Stuyvesant to be storekeeper of the Dutch West India Company’s effects and commander of the Company’s ships and forces when Stuyvesant was away from New Amsterdam.¹⁸

Jacob Kip, a son of Hendrick Kip, one of the original “Nine Men” of New Amsterdam, wed Marie de la Montagne, daughter of Dr. Jean de la Montagne and a niece of Isaack de Forest. Kip served as a clerk to Stuyvesant, later to be appointed one of the city’s magistrates and secretary to the Court of Burgomaster. He purchased a farm along the East River between 35th to 37th streets, which to this day is called “Kip’s Bay.”¹⁹

The most productive investments in urban public assets are those that provide direct benefit to the residents. The original residents who lived or owned property along Brouwer Straet, or Stone Street, between Whitehall and Broad streets clearly knew the costs and benefits of their public infra-

¹⁰ Alice P. Kenney, *Stubborn for Liberty the Dutch in New York* (Syracuse, 1975), 70-75.

¹¹ John A. Kouwenhoven, *The Columbia Historical Portrait of New York* (New York, 1952), 39-46.

¹² J. H. Innes, *New Amsterdam and Its People* (New York, 1902), 60-80.

¹³ Kym S. Rice, *Early American Taverns: For the Entertainment of Friends and Strangers* (Chicago, 1983), 23-30.

¹⁴ Emily De Forest, *A Walloon Family in America* (New York, 1920); 119.

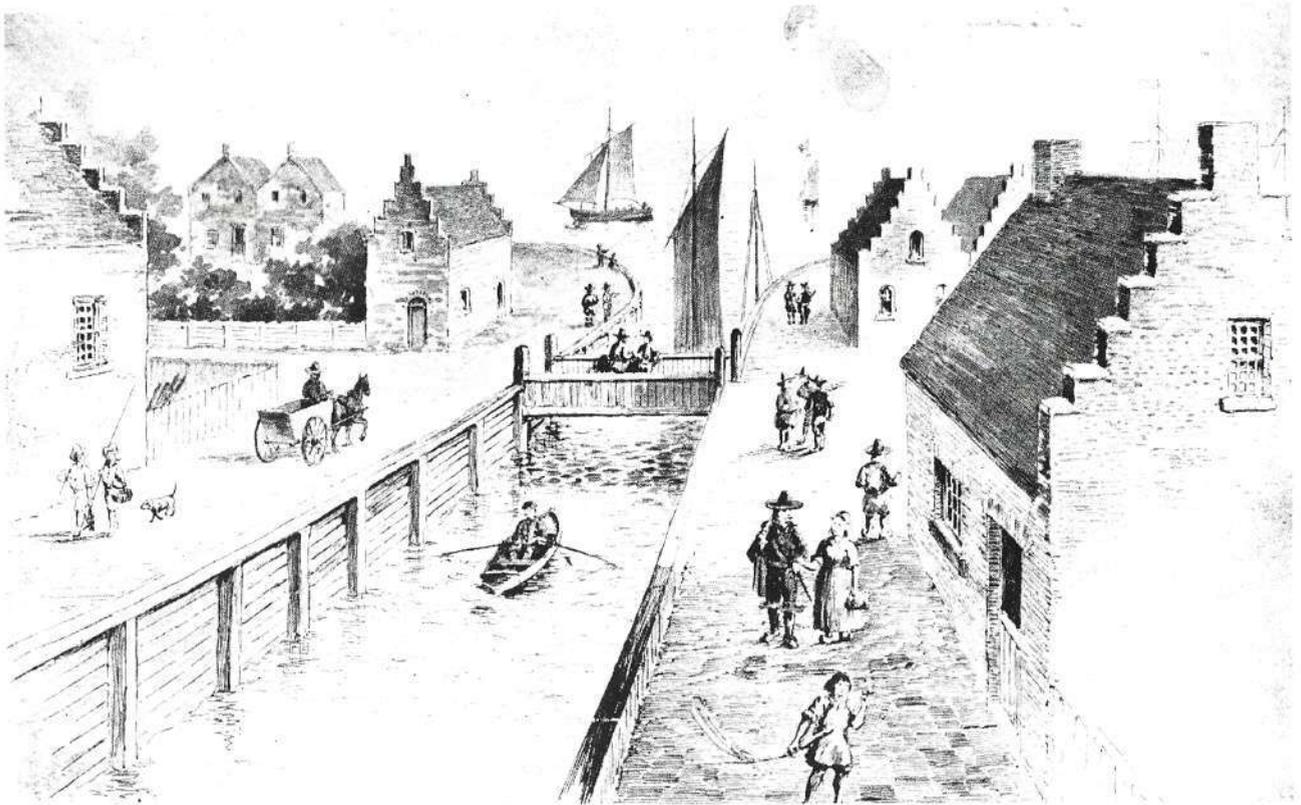
¹⁵ Innes, *New Amsterdam and its People* 75-79.

¹⁶ Peter Steven Gannon, *Huguenot Refugees in the Settling of Colonial America* (New York, 1985), 129-132.

¹⁷ De Forest, *A Walloon Family*, 130.

¹⁸ Innes, *New Amsterdam and its People*, 60-80.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*



Broad Street from Stone Street in the 1650s.

structure investment. As businessmen and public servants, the early residents of Stone Street understood the importance of public investment to enhance their “main” street. They stated in court at City Hall to the burgomasters and schepens of the “City of Amsterdam in New Netherland” on March 15, 1655:

We find by daily experience that said street is becoming more and more unfit for public use, so that we should be well inclined both for our own accommodation and the public good, ornament and welfare of the city, to pave the said street with round stone on the first favorable opportunity.²⁰

Along with eliminating dirt and grime from a muddy or dusty street, the building of a paved street was expected to ease the movement and distribution of beer barrels from the breweries along Brouwer Straet, which contributed to the health and well-being of its residents. Early records indicate that beer was consumed in abundance by New Amsterdam’s inhabitants, with many tapsters on each block forming an important part of the social structure along with the Company and the church.²¹ One of the great hardships endured by the early settlers was the initial absence of malt liquors. As the supply became more plentiful through importation and local production, families purchased large quantities of beer by the barrel or half-barrel. No ceremony, whether religious or civil, was complete without it. It wasn’t until Director General Petrus Stuyvesant’s enactment of a 1647 law forbidding its use that beer-tapping was banned during the hours of divine service.²²

Living and working in the same neighborhood clearly generated a concern and understanding of the relationship

between business and public enterprise and a willingness to pay for services directly benefiting property owners. A declaration was signed by Oloff Stevensen Van Cortlandt, Johannes van Brug, Willem Tomassen, Abram La Noy (Delanoy), Isaack Kip, Isaack de Forest, Jacob Kip, the mark of Teunis Kraey, Hendrick Hendricksen Kip, and Maria Geraerd. These citizens agreed to pay for these public works by submitting to special taxes, today better known as “special assessments,” set aside “for paying the public expenses and keeping in repair the works” of the city.²³

At a meeting at City Hall on January 24, 1658, the burgomasters authorized “Isaack de Forest and Jieronimus Ebbingh to contract this winter, in the presence of the presiding Burgomaster, for the pebble stone, so as to begin in the spring, and to assess, after the work is finished, each house standing in the street in proportion for the expense of the same.”²⁴

The paving of Stone Street in 1658 was a success, laying the groundwork for future public investment in New York City’s streets, subways, bridges, sidewalks, and parks. What remains of Stone Street in the 1990s is solely its commercial character. Much of its old residential character and traditions are now re-emerging in the new residential community of Tribeca, or the “triangle below Canal Street”

²⁰ Berthold Fernow, *The Records of New Amsterdam, Vol. 1, Minutes of the Court of Burgomasters and Schepens, 1653-1655* (Baltimore, Md., 1976), 300.

²¹ De Forest, *A Walloon Family*, 123-124.

²² Charles T. Gehring, *Laws and Writs of Appeal, 1647-1663* (New York, 1991), 7.

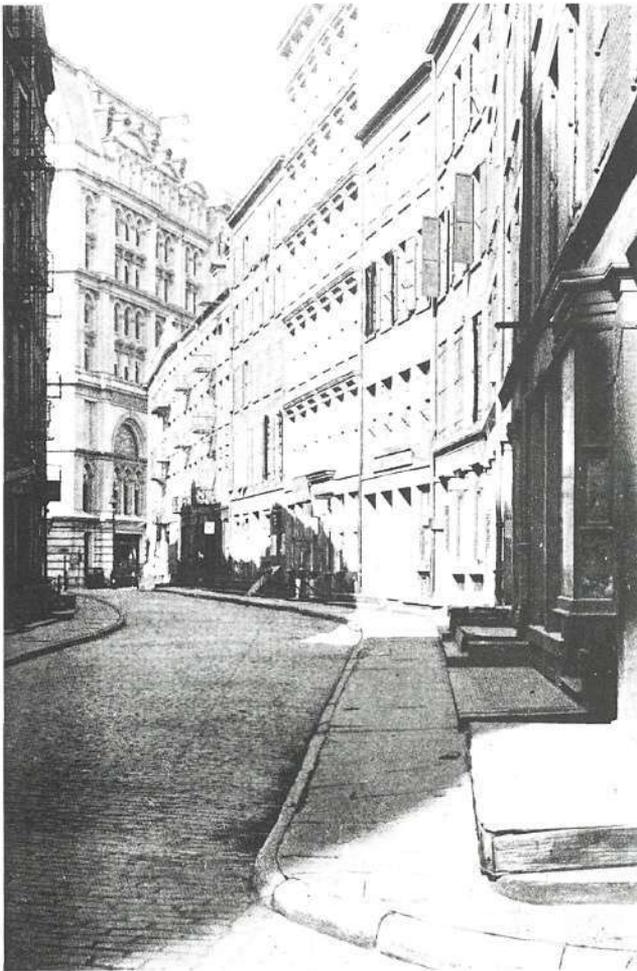
²³ Fernow, *Records of New Amsterdam*, 300.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

including the area just north of Chambers Street and west of Broadway, near the foot of Manhattan and Stone Street.

Stone Street in the 1990s has little of the residential character of its early history. A massive 1950s skyscraper takes up most of the northern part of the block, housing a rock music store which is directly across the street from a local pharmacy. The skyscraper provides back-office space for major Wall Street investment banking houses. What remains of the block is a parking lot, a Chinese restaurant and Stone Street Bar and Restaurant.

Remnants of early Stone Street's character remain nearby in the form of the Fraunces Tavern museum and restaurant, site of George Washington's field meetings. At the west end of Stone Street is New York Unearthed, a museum site of the South Street Seaport Museum which displays the archeological remains of the old City Hall. These were uncovered when the path of the original Stone Street was blocked by the erection of the new office building at 85 Broad Street, requiring extensive archeological investigation before the building was approved for ground breaking. Most of the stores on the original site were on the ground floor with residential space above. The backyards, where the remains of wells and cisterns were found, yielded a good many artifacts dating back to the Dutch era. The differences



Late nineteenth-century view of Stone Street.

between the Dutch and English eras are marked by the size of the building materials uncovered. The Dutch bricks are markedly thinner than those used by the British. Fraunces Tavern today serves the lunch time crowd of Wall Street, but it is not a gathering place for neighborhood residents.²⁵

Thinking about what it must have been like to live on Stone Street in the seventeenth century, some parallels can clearly be drawn with New York City in the 1990s and the re-emergence of residential living at the tip of Manhattan. The growth of Tribeca as a residential neighborhood in the 1970s occurred at a time when people moving into this area of "Old New York" were considered "urban pioneers." Tribeca, as part of Community District 1 in lower Manhattan, houses the bulk of its District 1's population, which grew from 6,800 in 1970 to 22,500 in 1988. This population growth compares with that of the English era, which in 1775 measured 22,000, with most residing south of Chambers Street. The magnitude of lower Manhattan's residential growth over eighteen years during the 1970s and 1980s took almost 100 years during the 1675 to 1775 period.

An urban pioneer's decision to move downtown from, for example, Manhattan's West Side was not in order to seek protection of property and life from the Native Americans by moving below the wall, now Wall Street, as Isaack de Forest did when in 1643 he left his dwelling house and tobacco plantation of 100 acres in Harlem, subsequently to become the main street of the site of Harlem village; but rather to live close to work and to avoid the crowded, uncertain, and sometimes unsafe subway crunch in the early hours of the morning. Although the public amenities were fewer, the chance to become part of a new neighborhood was a challenge and an opportunity. As at the White Horse Tavern of Phillip Gerardy on Stone Street or the Stadt Huys three and a half centuries ago, downtown politics are debated and resolved at Jim Stratton's Puffy's Tavern on Hudson Street. The "Nine Men" of New York are now part of the local nine-person Washington Market Park Board and members of Community District 1.

The legacy of New Amsterdam is still much in existence in Tribeca if you wander up Hudson Street above Chambers Street adjacent to the current City Hall. To the north is Duane Park, which commemorates the site of Anneke Jans' bouverie, or farm, which she received from the Dutch West India Company in 1636 in return for ten years of service to the Company.

Public-spiritedness survives, as it did in the Dutch period. Banding together, the local Tribeca tennis players have formed an organization and agreed to charge themselves an annual assessment to help keep the tennis courts in good condition and to defray certain park expenses. These funds pay for such public activities as local summer concerts, annual Halloween, Christmas, and Hanukkah celebrations, and trips to the country for neighborhood children. Fifteen years later, the tennis courts still survive and serve as a social gathering spot for the young and old.

The fierce independence and public spiritedness of our New Netherland ancestors have, in a way, repeated themselves. The public amenities that have grown and flourished a few blocks from Mayor David N. Dinkins's City Hall have distinct parallels. Just as Isaack de Forest was granted

²⁵ Rice, *Early American Taverns* 125-133.

by Director Kieft a certain piece of land measuring approximately half an acre, connected by a passageway running from the public market which he used as a vegetable garden, so the citizens of Tribeca have been granted a nonprofit vest pocket park by the city fathers, with small plots as "victory gardens" and surrounded by a sturdy iron fence in the public enclave of what is now Washington Market Park. How nice it is to grow those ripe tomatoes that are harvested in early September without fear of invasion from outsiders in the dead of night. The elegant bridge now being constructed at the western foot of Chambers Street, which crosses over the Henry Hudson Parkway on West Street, is to protect neighborhood children making their way to Stuyvesant High School from being run over by speeding cars coming out of the Holland Tunnel, just as the bridges over Broad Street at the foot of Stone Street protected colonial children from falling into the canal.

Today's community fear is not about invasion by the Native Americans or the British, but about the invasion of precious remaining open space by a twenty-story Commodities Exchange building that will cast a shadow over Washington Market Park and deprive its trees and children from needed sunlight. Hudson Street is being dug up to replace the worn-out water pipes six feet below the street's surface, but because of revenue shortages, the old cobblestones are to be paved over with asphalt; a clear example of short term savings and outlook at the cost, over the long term, of losing one aspect of the character and historical context of a vibrant New York City neighborhood.

An interesting current example of the use of special assessments to finance public infrastructure paid by special district property owners, similar to the payments made by the Stone Street residents of the 1650s, is the Grand Central

Partnership District in Midtown Manhattan. Thirty million dollars in municipal bonds were issued to provide public amenities such as street lighting, benches, expanded curbing, and services around Grand Central Station. Financing costs for these public improvements, paid for solely by the property owners within the special district around Grand Central Station, achieved a lower interest cost than would have bonds issued by New York City as a whole because of the relatively stronger economic and financial characteristics of this special district.²⁶

At a time of general revenue scarcity, there is a clear necessity at the local level for creativity in the financing and delivery of public infrastructure and services.²⁷ Combining special district financing with historic preservation generates economic value. A greater awareness and careful examination of the costs and benefits of public special assessment financing by property owners of business and residential improvement districts that incorporate and preserve an historical cultural awareness of the roots of New York City keeps the commercial and public sector communities working together to make the city a better place in which to live and work.²⁸

Stone Street "paved" the way in setting the initial public infrastructure finance policy for New York City. The use of special assessments to finance certain aspects of the city's infrastructure is, indeed, as relevant today as it was 350 years ago.

²⁶ Institute for Urban Design, *Grand Central Partnership Creates a New Midtown District* (San Diego, Calif., 1991), Vol. 3, No.2.

²⁷ Elliot Sclar, et al., *Does America Need Cities* (Washington, D.C., 1991), 20-25.

²⁸ Courtney A. Huff, "Beach Restoration Preservation Financing for Captiva Island, Florida", *Proceedings of the Coastal Society* (Boston, 1989), 376-385.

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