



# Promoting the Dutch Worldview: Roosevelt & Verplanck

by Bill Jeffway

A prior column on the topic of depictions of history in public places briefly examined Franklin Roosevelt's association with the 1909 Hudson Fulton Celebration, looking at how natural it was for a politician of Dutch heritage to wish to elevate the Dutch worldview of conquest. There was, however, an earlier Dutchess County politician, also of Dutch ancestry, who played an important role in elevating the Dutch side of the story in public places.

In the 1830s, Gulian Crommelin Verplanck (1786-1870) of Fishkill and New York City, was not only a U.S. Congressman, he was chairman of the House Committee on Public Buildings and oversaw artist commissions for public art in the U.S. Capitol Building.

Verplanck's ancestral family included the Van Cortlandts, who collectively owned swaths of land from Westchester to Dutchess County. The Verplanck family home is known as Mount Gulian in Fishkill and still stands and is open to the public ([mountgulian.org](http://mountgulian.org)).

In 1835, executed to flatter the taste of Verplanck, the aspiring artist Robert Walter Weir not only painted the arrival of the representatives of the Dutch East India Company, but depicted them landing specifically on family land, Verplanck's Point, in Westchester County. The scene is one of joy. The land is lush. The native population is robust, energetic and equal in scale and physical stature.

No better example exists of the ability

of political intent to guide the artistic hand when it comes to public works of art than comparing Weir's 1835 painting with his painting of the same topic in 1838.

Weir had just been appointed teacher of art at West Point Military Academy. With an eye on being elevated to Professor (which he achieved in 1846), and no doubt from the experience of working directly with men who were going off to escalating wars with native people in Florida, the tone changed dramatically. Known as the Seminole Wars, the U.S. military was enforcing the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which as the name suggests, was designed to forcibly remove native people westward.

In the 1838 painting, from the same artist, the land is barren and unfruitful. The native people are small in scale and recessive in their presence. A burnt orange color creates a feeling of foreboding.

The lobbying and sensitivity to national political winds seemed to work. Weir got a commission to paint for the U.S. Capitol in 1843. It is not of Hudson's arrival, but the subject matter was less important to him.

Weir had set the mold. The two approaches, one that he is happy for all, one that is more foreboding, became replicated forever after.

The first depiction of Hudson's arrival in the U.S. Capitol Building was by Albert Bierstadt in 1872. He painted a very optimistic scene, reminiscent of

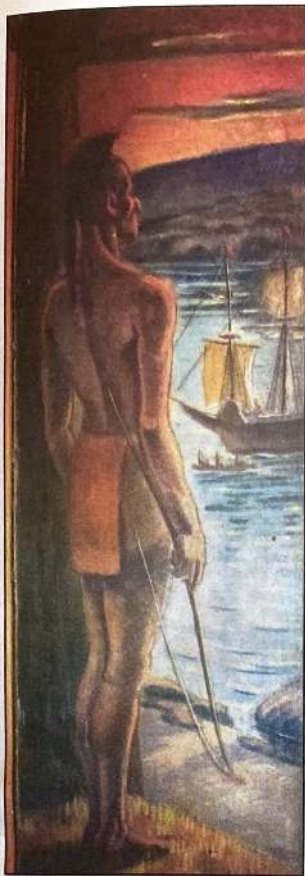
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A few years into his tenure as head teacher of painting at West Point Military Academy, Robert Weir depicted the same scene of Hudson's arrival with a far more brooding and menacing tone. By 1838, the Seminole Indian War escalated as native people in Florida refused to be forcibly relocated to the west by the U.S. military. Below: In 1835, the artist Robert Weir painted the arrival of Henry Hudson at Verplanck's Point specifically for Congressman Gulian Verplanck, who was of Dutch heritage, and whose ancestor's owned the point depicted. *Images courtesy of DCHS*



Northern/Southern Dutchess News / Beacon Free Press  
October 21, 2020



The Weir paintings of the 1830s, with Hudson arriving under the gaze of native people, set a pattern that was repeated in public spaces, for example in the Hyde Park Post Office murals by Olin Dows in 1940. *Image courtesy of DCHS*

Weir's 1835 version. In 1892, Edward Moran painted a more ambivalent and foreboding picture, in the manner of the 1838 version. Now in the Collections of the Berkshire Museum, perhaps to be clear his painting is original relative to Weir's, the formal title of Moran's painting is "Henrik Hudson Entering New York Harbor, September 11, 1609." (Not Verplanck's Point!).

To say the least, the September 1609 arrival of Henry Hudson on behalf of the Dutch East India Company was the commencement of a very different experience for the Dutch than it was for the indigenous people. The depictions of the event by artists in public spaces in the U.S. are clearly from the European perspective. Through this series, over time, we are working to include a broader range of voices.

More recent depictions of Hudson's arrival, imitating the Weir format of the arrival under the gaze of the native population, is made in the 1940 Rhinebeck and Hyde Park Post Offices. Both were painted by Olin Dows, under the direction of President Roosevelt.

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