



Painting the Past

Hudson River History
through the eyes of Len Tantillo

Art by Len Tantillo
Text by Eileen Stegemann



Manhattan, 1660 - The Dutch ship *Trouw* departs Manhattan for its return trip home. Ships like the *Trouw* made a number of trips across the Atlantic each year, ferrying people and cargo between the Dutch Republic and the New World. (Compare this painting to Greg Miller's photo on page 8.)

Born and raised in upstate New York,

talented artist Len Tantillo brings history to life through his remarkable historically accurate paintings. Much of his work celebrates maritime subjects, many depicting the early history of the Hudson River.

Creating an accurate portrait requires extensive research, and Len often works with many of New York's most knowledgeable historians. Len then creates models of the scenes he plans to paint—previously building detailed scale models (some more than 30 feet long). Today he uses digital modeling to create accurate on-screen models of buildings, ships and forts. The digital format allows him to add or remove buildings, change

lighting and texture, and rotate the models to see different views. From that model, Len can then put brush to canvas.

Tantillo's work has appeared in national exhibitions, books, periodicals, and television documentaries in the U.S., England, Netherlands, Belgium, Australia and New Zealand. This September through November, many of his paintings will be included in an exhibit in the West Fries Museum in Hoorn, Holland as part of their *Hollanders* and the Hudson celebration.

Here, Tantillo's work celebrates the rich history of the Hudson River, from Henry Hudson's time to the early 1900s.







Detail of *Kate's Light* from preceding page

Kate's Light - From her vantage point on Robbins Reef Lighthouse in the Hudson River, (circa 1900), Kate Walker watches the crew of the buoy-tender *Gardenia* go about its business of inspecting and tending the river's buoys. Kate's been the lighthouse keeper for many years now, and she enjoys the boating activity she witnesses every day.

Kate's story is an interesting one. Emigrating from Germany, Kate was a young widow with a small son when she met and married John Walker, assistant keeper of Sandy Hook Lighthouse in New Jersey. With land to grow vegetables and flowers, Kate enjoyed her life at Sandy Hook. But that soon changed when her husband was made keeper of the recently reconstructed Robbins Reef Lighthouse. Surrounded by water, with no land around the lighthouse and only a small stone pier to walk on, Kate hated her new home. But she gradually adjusted to the 360-degree harbor view, and was even made her husband's assistant, adding \$350 to John's annual salary of \$600.

A few years later, John developed pneumonia and died, leaving Kate a widow with two children to care for. It is said that John's parting words to his wife were "Mind the light, Kate." So Kate applied for the keeper position, but in a time when government regulations did not allow women to be in charge of an offshore lighthouse, let alone a petite 4' 10" woman with two small children, the job was not offered to her until after two men turned it down.

Being a lighthouse keeper was an incredibly difficult job, but Kate kept the lighthouse in perfect order. At the same time, she would row her children to Staten Island to attend school. Kate also rowed out to assist stranded vessels and is credited with saving more than fifty lives, mostly fishermen.

In 1919, at the age of 73, Kate retired to nearby Staten Island where she remained until her death in 1931. To this day, because of Kate's long tenure there, many still refer to the Robbins Reef Lighthouse as "Kate's Light."



Creekside - A typical Dutch farm in the 1640s. Because there were few improved trails at this time, most farms were located along waterways. To travel and carry goods, farmers used a boat, like the shallop pictured here.



A View of Fort Orange, 1682 - The *Flower of Gelderland* sits on the Hudson River offshore of Beverwyck (present day Albany). Larger ships like the *Gelderland* carried dozens of colonists and their cargo to the New World. However, because of their larger size and deep draft, these ships could not reach shore, requiring smaller ships (like the ones pictured here) to ferry their cargo to town. Pictured directly behind the ships is Fort Orange, built in 1624 as one of the first permanent settlements in the area.



The Dayliner Albany - The *Albany* was one of two steamships—the other was the *New York*—that was operated between Albany and New York City by the Hudson River Day Line at the turn of the century. Beginning each day at opposite ends of the run, the two ships would leave their docks at the same time, passing each other at Poughkeepsie. Built in 1880, the *Albany* was remodeled, sold and converted a number of times. It enjoyed a long life, its last iteration as a barge that was still afloat in 1965. (Circa 1890)



Pap-scan-ee - Looking east towards Massachusetts (circa 1600), a lone Mahican tribesman makes his way back towards his summer camp on the Papscanee Creek, a tributary to the Hudson River. Hunters and farmers, the Mahicans used weirs, like the one pictured here in the creek, to catch fish as they ran upstream. Crops, like corn, beans and squash, were grown on the fertile soil found between the creek and the Hudson to the west. Amazingly, corn is still grown on this same site—more than 400 years later.



Portrait of America - Passing State Street Landing in Albany (circa 1868), Thomas Schuyler surveys the waters of the Hudson from the deck of his steamboat company's flagship *America*. A side-wheel steamship capable of towing seventy fully loaded barges at once, *America* was built in 1852 as the crowning glory of the Schuyler family's fleet of towboats, collectively known as the Schuyler Tow Boat Line.

The Schuyler Company was founded in the 1820s by Captain Samuel Schuyler. Simply listed as "a free man of color," Samuel excelled in a time when slavery was still legal. Under his direction, and later that of his sons, Samuel Jr. and Thomas, Schuyler's tow boat line became one of the largest and most successful towing companies on the Hudson.

America represents the fulfillment of the American dream by a remarkable family that succeeded despite the racial prejudice of the times.



Morning Mist on the Hudson - With Albany as a backdrop, a variety of ships ply the Hudson's waters, ferrying people and goods to and from the burgeoning city (circa 1790). Sailors are off-loading goods from the larger ketch, while the periagua and smaller huy both sit idle for the moment, their cargoes and crews already on shore. Carrying its cargo upriver, a barge-like gundelo is a reminder of the recently-ended Revolutionary War. Originally outfitted with a cannon, gundeloes were built on the Hudson for use as gunboats. Hiding in the background behind the periagua is a Hudson River sloop, the most common ship to sail the river at this time.

Born and raised in upstate N.Y., **Len Tantillo** lives in southern Rensselaer County, not far from the Hudson River. His work can be viewed at www.lftantillo.com.

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