

Pressing a Claim for Dutch History

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Even by the standards of [New York City](#), one of the earliest settlements in North America, 282 years is a long time. That is how long the Collegiate Church Corporation has owned the land where the Corbin Building sits at 11 John Street and Broadway in Lower [Manhattan](#).



Michael Flaco for The New York Times

John Harrington Jr., left, and Casey Kemper of the Collegiate Church Corporation, which hopes to turn the Corbin Building in Lower Manhattan into a Dutch heritage center.

But on Friday, the land and the building will be taken by eminent domain (along with three other buildings owned by the church) for the new Fulton Street Transit Center. Originally all four buildings were to be demolished, but after a community tussle, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority agreed to incorporate the basement and first floor of the Corbin Building, built in 1888-89, into the design of the station and to leave the rest of the edifice intact.

Now, with the building's upper floors available for redevelopment, the Collegiate Church wants to turn the building into the New Amsterdam Center, a collection of Dutch-related historic, cultural and business enterprises in honor of its religious heritage and New York City's first settlers.

"We support the transit center, and we're not objecting to eminent domain," said Casey R. Kemper, president of Collegiate Realty, the real estate arm of the church. "But our heritage should be respected. We've owned the land for almost 300 years."

The Collegiate Church claims to be the oldest Protestant congregation with a continuous ministry in the United States. Members of the

Dutch Reformed Church began meeting in 1626 in Lower Manhattan, and the congregation later became known as the Collegiate Church.

The Collegiate Church has owned the land that the Corbin sits on since 1724. The corporation now oversees four churches in Manhattan, including Marble Collegiate, where Dr. Norman Vincent Peale preached for many years.

The management of Collegiate Church has told the authority that it wants to either repurchase the building or retain control through a master lease, but it was told that the M.T.A. would not deal with that until the transit project was finished.

The work will turn the Fulton Street subway station into a \$750 million transit center with six subway lines and retail and office space. It is already behind schedule and has been scaled back because of budget constraints.

"They have expressed interest in working with us," said Tom Kelly, a spokesman for the authority. "We have told them we will work with them at the end of the project."

But Collegiate Church believes that now is the time to hammer out the details. With ownership of the Corbin and three other buildings about to be transferred through eminent domain, negotiations for "just compensation" are set to begin. Under this process, the owner and the taker come to an agreement about the value of the buildings and land.

A developer hired by the Collegiate Church to put together the New Amsterdam Center proposal says that waiting until the Fulton Street Transit Center is complete would scuttle the plan.

"There is about a three- to six-month window of opportunity," said Ad Hereijgers, a native of the Netherlands who has a real estate and development office in New York called New Amsterdam Development Consultants. "The people I'm talking to about moving into the Corbin Building can't wait until the project is complete to decide if they can relocate."

The vision for the New Amsterdam Center is to assemble under one roof New York's earliest historically relevant organizations supported by Dutch commercial interests.

The anchor tenant would be the New Amsterdam History Center, run jointly by the Collegiate Church and the New Netherland Institute, which is now in Albany. The institute has undertaken the New Netherland Project, which involves translating all Dutch documents related to New York's earliest founding. Other floors would be dedicated to Dutch cultural organizations, like the Netherlands Architectural Institute, a museum of historical and contemporary Dutch architecture based in Rotterdam. There are also plans for a media center, office space and a rooftop restaurant.

Jacob Willemsen owns the New Amsterdam Trade and Consultancy, which is in Midtown and provides desk space to Dutch-based companies that prefer not to set up an independent office. "All my desks are fully booked, and there's a demand for offices like this," Mr. Willemsen said. He has toured the Corbin Building and would like to become part of the New Amsterdam Center. "I could easily take two floors in the building, and it would be good for New York's heritage."

Henry Hudson sailed into the harbor in late August 1609 for the Dutch East India Company, paving the way for the Dutch to become the first settlers of "Manna-hata," as the island was originally referred to, according to "The Island at the Center of the World," a history of Dutch Manhattan by Russell Shorto. England eventually wrested control of New Amsterdam from the Dutch and renamed it New York.

While the land that the Corbin occupies has been in Dutch-affiliated hands for nearly 300 years, the eight-story Corbin Building was erected in 1888-89 for Austin Corbin, an English businessman. It was designed by Francis Hatch Kimball, one of Manhattan's most important pre-skyscraper architects, and is one of the more distinctive buildings in Lower Manhattan, with an irregular shape, red terra-cotta facade, Romanesque detailing and the original interior stairway and railing. The New York Landmarks Conservancy led an effort to have it protected, and it was placed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places in 2003.

The Collegiate Church hopes to have the New Amsterdam Center open by August 2009, the 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson's arrival. "We have a certain amount of leverage now that we won't have later," Mr. Kemper said. "We plan to enter into the just-compensation negotiations about what we expect to get for all the buildings — including continued involvement with the Corbin — and everyone can come out smelling like a rose. Otherwise, we're concerned about how long this will drag on.

"Everyone agrees that Lower Manhattan should have more historical, cultural and commercial interests to help it recover from Sept. 11. And that's precisely what this would be."