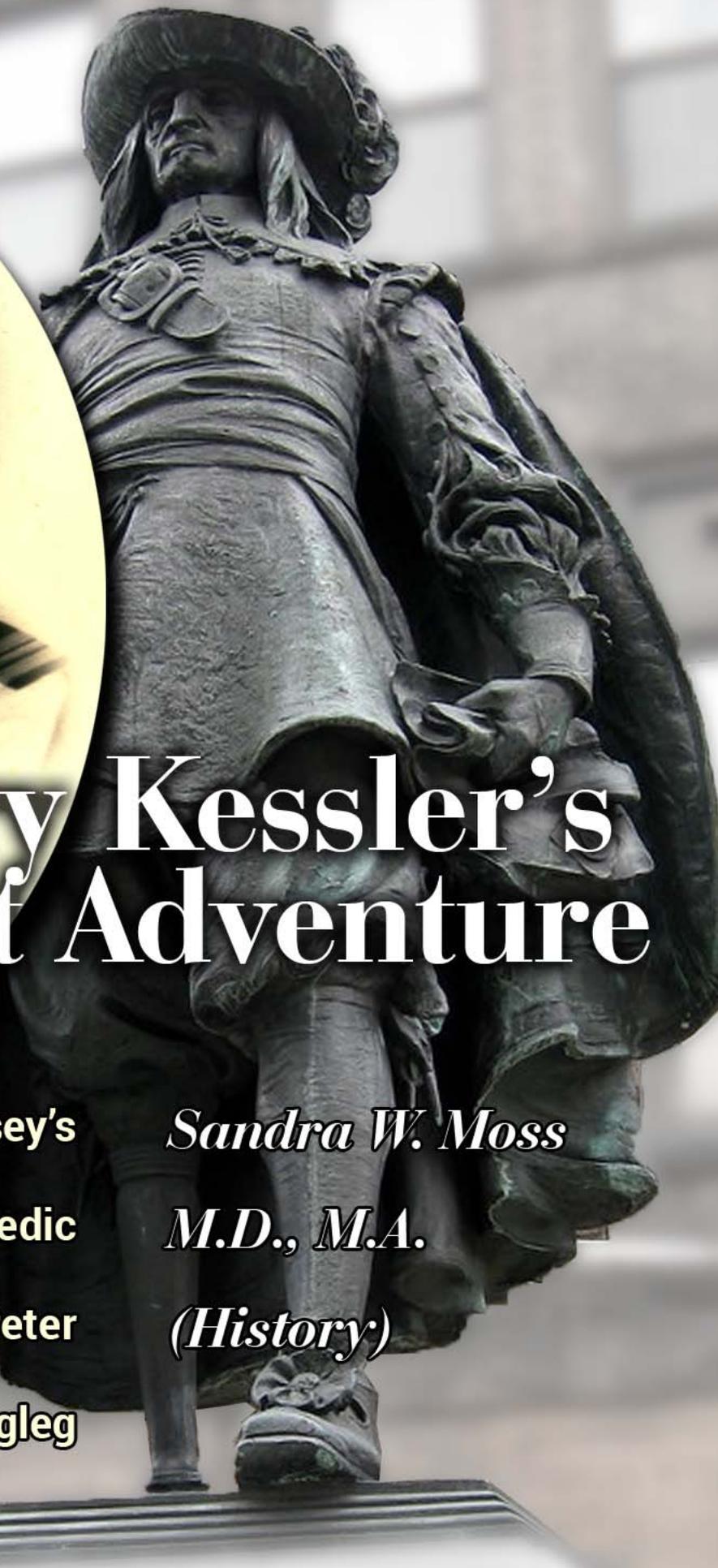
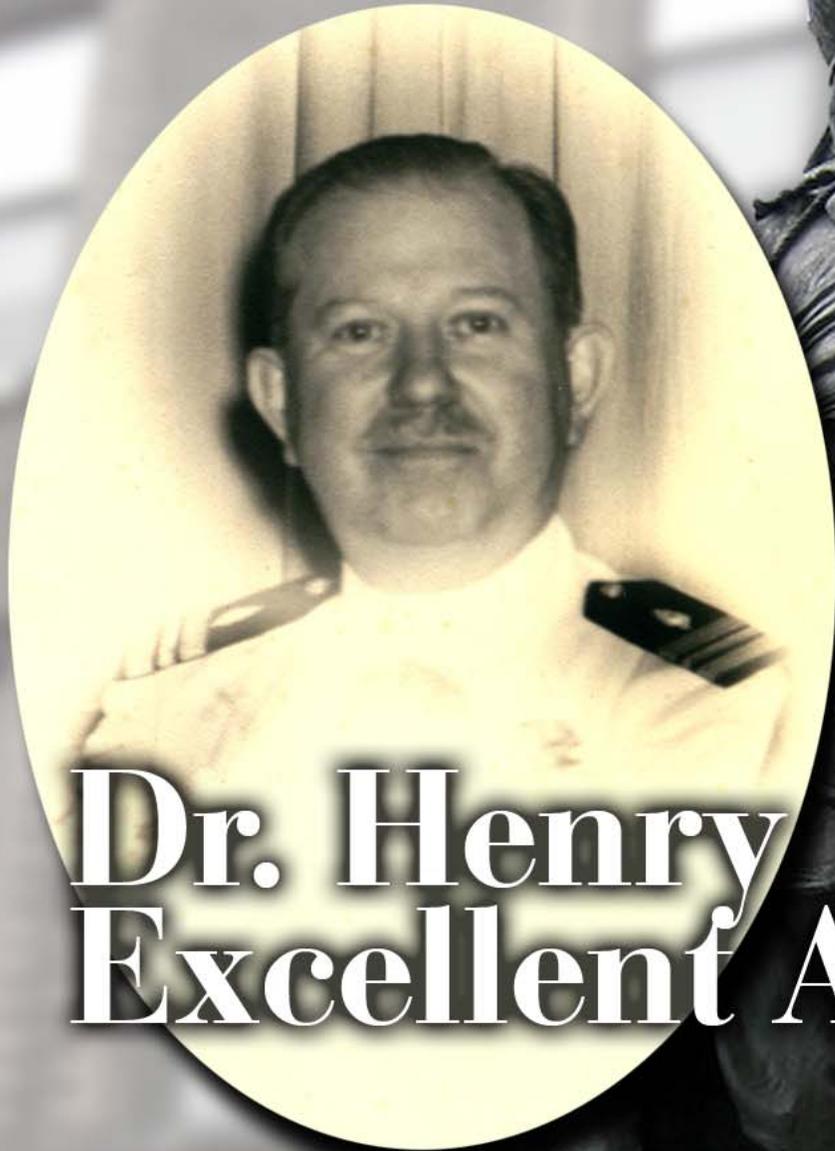


Figure 1: Henry Kessler in his Navy dress uniform, ca 1945.

Photograph courtesy Robert Vietrogoski, Special Collections in the History of Medicine, Rutgers University Libraries



Dr. Henry Kessler's Excellent Adventure

**New Jersey's
Premiere Orthopedic
Physician and Peter
Stuyvesant's Pegleg**

*Sandra W. Moss
M.D., M.A.
(History)*

Live in New Jersey? Been to rehab? Chances are you are familiar with one of the ninety plus Kessler rehabilitation facilities across the state. Few now remember Dr. Henry Kessler, and fewer still know about his avocational connection to a famous seventeenth-century amputee.



Figure 2: Henry Kessler (R) adjusting what appears to be a full leg stabilizing brace at Mare Island Naval Hospital, ca. 1945.

Photograph courtesy Peter Corina, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Libraries



Figure 3: Henry H. Kessler (L) and his son Dr. Jerome Kessler (R) fit a prosthesis on a toddler at Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation, West Orange, NJ 1955. It is possible that this child, with three devastating limb deformities, was a victim of thalidomide.

Photograph courtesy Robert Gerth, Kessler Foundation, with permission from the Kessler family.

JERSEY SURGEON WITH A MISSION

Born in working class Newark in 1896, orthopedic surgeon Henry Kessler graduated from Cornell Medical School in 1919. From 1921 until 1941, he devoted part of his professional time to the New Jersey State Rehabilitation Commission. It was the beginning of a career devoted to the infant field of rehabilitation medicine.

Called up as a Naval Reserve surgeon in 1942 with the rank of lieutenant commander, Kessler served on the island of Efate (New Hebrides/Vanuatu) in the South Pacific theater (**Figure 1**). Plane after plane transported gravely wounded men from Guadalcanal and other South Pacific battlefields to the Quonset hut operating room where Kessler found himself performing “guillotine amputations” on shrapnel infected legs and arms.¹ One triple limb amputation, in particular, left Kessler shaken to the core. Once stabilized, the amputees and other wounded were airlifted to stateside hospitals. He was deeply distressed by the grievous wounds and blighted futures of these young men.

Later in the war, Kessler headed the amputation and rehabilitation center at Mare Island Naval Hospital in California, putting his experience at the New Jersey Rehabilitation Commission to work for the military. As his expertise in rehabilitation grew, he also developed considerable skill in prosthetics (**Figure 2**).

In 1948, Kessler founded the Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation in West Orange, New Jersey and the first patient was admitted the next year. His emphasis was on multidisciplinary and comprehensive rehabilitation—physical, mental, occupational, social—of each child and adult. He considered the Institute to be his greatest achievement (**Figure 3**).

From his base in the Kessler Institute, Kessler served as United Nations ambassador for comprehensive rehabilitation of disabled children and adults around the world. His autobiography, *The Knife is Not Enough* (1968), details the triumphs and frustrations of these global efforts.

Among Kessler's many honors and awards was a New Jersey Governor's Citation bearing these well-chosen words:

...internationally known orthopedic surgeon; surgical pioneer; symbol of hope for the afflicted and disabled; rehabilitator of bodies; restorer of dignity to man by preparing him to be self sufficient and self supporting; humanitarian; and a distinguished American gentleman.



Figure 4: The location of the island of Sint Maarten (Saint Martin) in the Caribbean.

www.wikipedia.com



Figure 5: Ruins of a cannon at Fort Amsterdam, overlooking the bay where Stuyvesant's fleet may have anchored.

Alamy Images

ENCOUNTER AT SINT MAARTEN

Kessler's unlikely hobby was unraveling the story of one of history's most famous amputees and "peglegs," Peter Stuyvesant, last Director-General of New Netherland. Perhaps it was not such a strange obsession for a doctor who had done so many wartime amputations and was an expert in lower extremity prostheses.

Peter (also Pieter or Petrus) Stuyvesant was born in 1610 or 1611 in Friesland to a Dutch

Reform minister.² A loyal employee of the Dutch West India Company, he was dispatched in the late 1630s to Curaçao, one of several Dutch colonies in the Caribbean. From his initial posting as chief commercial officer on Curaçao, he rose to the governorship of Curaçao, Aruba, and Bonaire.

In 1644, Stuyvesant set out on his first military venture—an assault on the island of Sint Maarten (**Figure 4**), five hundred miles distant in the Leeward Islands. The Spanish had captured the island with its valuable salt beds and tobacco plantations from the Dutch in 1633, and Stuyvesant aimed to reclaim it for the Dutch West India Company. A present-day plaque beneath a statue of Stuyvesant on Sint Maarten recounts the details of the failed assault:

With a fleet of thirteen ships, Stuyvesant set sail to Sint Maarten. He landed at Cay Bay on March 20, 1644, and made camp at Cay Hill. A summons was dispatched to the Spanish garrison at the fort [Fort Amsterdam, built by the Dutch in 1631] while a delegation under Stuyvesant's command climbed the battery on Bel Air Hill to plant their flag. The Spanish, spotting them from the fort, fired a cannon in their direction. Stuyvesant was severely wounded in his right leg by this shot. He was taken aboard his ship, *De Blauwe Haan*

[Blue Cock] where his leg was amputated from the knee down.³ (Figure 5)



Figure 6: Portrait of Peter Stuyvesant, attributed to Hendrick Couturier.

www.wikipedia.com

In great pain and undoubtedly further compromised by wound infection, Stuyvesant (Figure 6) maintained the siege for twenty-eight days. He blamed his troops for the defeat, complaining that it was “difficult to catch hares with unwilling dogs.” He later wrote to the Company that the attack “did not succeed as well as I had hoped, no small impediment having been the loss of my right leg, it being removed by a rough ball,” and of “pain, distress, and difficulties” and a “grave illness.” He sailed from Curaçao for Holland in June, 1644, but stormy seas drove the vessel to Ireland. He did not arrive at his sister’s home near Leiden, where he convalesced, until some eight months after the encounter at Sint Maarten.

In fact, the historical record gives no precise information about the date or site of the amputation—whether on his flagship or later in Curaçao—the name of the surgeon, or the fitting of the pegleg. Kessler was intrigued by the lacunae and discrepancies in accounts of Stuyvesant’s wound and subsequent amputation and was determined to resolve the mystery.

BRINGING IT HOME TO NEW JERSEY: KESSLER AND THE POST-WAR REHABILITATION LANDSCAPE

In late June 1952, Kessler flew to London for the first post-war meeting of the International Congress of Physical Medicine and a meeting of the British Orthopedic Association. He kept a lively detailed travel and meeting diary, later transcribed, and now resting in the archives of the Rutgers University Libraries.

At the conference sessions, Kessler took copious notes on “take home” points such as the use of new drugs for the treatment of tuberculosis of the bones and joints, a new ultrasound deep heat apparatus, and on the function of social workers in rehabilitation facilities. He was impressed by the famous military hospital at Aldershot, the Robert Jones Orthopaedic Hospital in Oswestry, and the treatment of congenital hip disorders at the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital. He bemoaned the general lack of interest in rehabilitation medicine among American physicians.

Scattered among the detailed medical notes were personal comments, revealing and often quite droll. On a tour of a large plastic surgical unit in East Grinstead, a physician from Argentina invited him to a congress. Kessler dutifully jotted: “I must learn Spanish.”

On the social side, he noted that the flight over was “smooth and comfortable”; hotel arrangements were “difficult”; the first day’s meals “about five percent better than last time”; and the



Figure 7: Portrait of Josiah Wedgwood by George Stubbs, 1780, enamel on a Wedgwood ceramic tablet, at the Wedgwood Museum, England.

www.wikipedia.com

beer unappealingly “warm.” However, many pleasant and elegant meals followed in the course of the meetings. There were side trips, including a visit to the Lake District, where Kessler confined his notes to the astonishing revelation that Wordsworth’s “relationship with his sister was a very close one.”

Never one to miss an opportunity to learn about prosthetics, Kessler took tea with Dorothy Wedgwood, a descendent of the celebrated potter Josiah Wedgwood (**Figure 7**). Wedgwood’s leg, deformed in childhood, was amputated electively in 1768 when he was thirty-eight years old. Kessler was interested in any information she might have about his artificial leg.

HENRY KESSLER’S “EXCELLENT ADVENTURE”

The London medical meetings also provided a splendid opportunity for Kessler to pursue the story behind the story of Stuyvesant’s amputation and pegleg. He was determined to learn all he could about Dutch seventeenth-century medical and surgical practice. And so, Henry embarked on his “excellent adventure,” first in England and then across the North Sea in Holland.

He began by learning what he could at the library of the British Museum. At Foyles, a major London bookseller, he asked a staff member to secure for him a copy of an 1893 American biography of Stuyvesant. “Alerting” archivists and booksellers to be on the lookout for any pertinent books or documents was a key research strategy that he deployed as he continued his inquiries in Holland.

In late July, he flew to Holland for a four- or five-day whirlwind research marathon—rushing from archives to bookshops to museums in search of Peter Stuyvesant’s amputation. From his base in Amsterdam, he made daytrips by train to The Hague, Arnhem, and Leiden, keeping detailed notes on each day’s adventures. His working assumption was a radical departure from the accepted account of Stuyvesant’s amputation:

Certain factors have jelled [*sic*] in my own thinking and my own planning. Apparently my thesis will be this: Peter Stuyvesant in the Battle of San Martin, when his leg was injured, did not have his leg amputated. Nor did he lose his leg, nor was it buried in Curaçao as legend has it. My thesis will be that he came to Holland to have the leg removed and attended to and later fitted with an artificial limb. This entire matter is entirely unclear and it is the thesis on which I am going to work and try to clear up.

In Arnhem, he met with a Dutch physician, “a scholarly man with a twinkle in his eye,” who could find nothing about Stuyvesant or the doctors who might have treated him in the



Figure 8: "The Barber Surgeon," by Dutch painter Issac Koedyck (Koedijck).

www.wikipedia.com

Dutch language *History of the Three Centuries of Dutch Medicine*. "However, he has been alerted and will help me in this field."

At a bookstore in Amsterdam, he met another customer, a professor of history from Montreal, who turned out to be a Stuyvesant fan. The professor confirmed to Kessler that the exact circumstances concerning Stuyvesant's leg remained a mystery. "No one knows anything about it and he encouraged me to go on in this research since I would be making an important contribution if I could clear up this mystery."

An archivist at the National Archives in The Hague found a letter in Stuyvesant's handwriting. Kessler—no doubt thrilled to hold such a document in his own hands—had it photographed and translated. After a "delightful out-of-door lunch" with the archivist, he was shown old records naming the doctors at the University of Leiden, "and so it was necessary for me to go to Leiden."

A librarian in Leiden "discounted the role of any university professors and suggested that I explore the guilds." Surgery, including amputations, would have been performed by apprentice-trained barber surgeons (**Figure 8**) rather than university-trained physicians steeped in theory. "And so by train I went back to Amsterdam."

At the Municipal Archives in Amsterdam, efforts to find information on the barber-surgeon or limbmaker guilds "led into a blind alley." "However," he wrote, "Mr. Hoboken who is the director of the guild is alerted and will look up any information he possibly can get for me in this field."⁴ Ultimately, Kessler's quest to identify the Dutch surgeon or surgeons "who might have been in a position to take his leg off" also proved to be a "blind alley."

At Amsterdam's Maritime Museum, he marveled at the rich collection of books, exhibits, and ship models. He found useful references to seventeenth-century medical practices on Dutch East India Company vessels: examination of medical officers, shipboard health regulations, and medical treatments and instruments. Kessler thought it was a "fair presumption that the practices were similar aboard the ships of the West India Company [founded 1621, nineteen years after the founding of the Dutch East India Company], although perhaps not as well worked out." The curator of the Maritime Museum was very courteous and was "alerted" to look for any information that might be useful to Kessler's quest.

While in Amsterdam, he visited the shop of a "limbmaker," to learn about the state of limbmaking in Stuyvesant's time. The proprietor of the century-old shop brought out an old pegleg, judged to be seventy-five years old, of the type Stuyvesant used. The limbmaker thought that Stuyvesant may have bought this type of wooden leg in Paris or had one made there to the specifications of his own doctor or limbmaker in Holland. Kessler bought the pegleg for six dollars, intending to place it on display at his West Orange rehabilitation hospital.

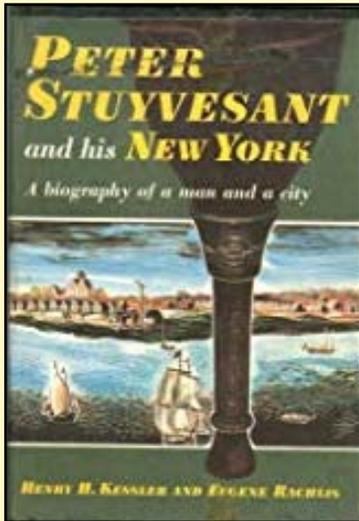


Figure 9: "Peter Stuyvesant and His New York," by Kessler and Rachlis, 1959.

www.wikipedia.com

In a surrealistic coda, as he prepared to fly back to England, Kessler was "accosted at the airport by an amputee who saw me carrying my artificial pegleg." The man demonstrated his own leg and related his odyssey through Dutch and Swiss models before settling on a Desoutter leg, a British lightweight aluminum design dating back to World War I.

REVISING THE SCENARIO

In 1959, Kessler and Eugene Rachlis co-authored *Peter Stuyvesant and his New York: A Biography of a Man and a City* (Figure 9). Rachlis was a writer, newspaper correspondent, editor, and an information officer for the Marshall Plan mission to the Netherlands. The *New York Times*, in a review by the director of the New York Historical Society, hailed the book, which included newly discovered information from Dutch archives, as the "first well-written, well-documented and almost completely accurate life of Governor General Stuyvesant."⁵ According to the newsletter of the Holland Society of New York, Kessler learned Dutch to assist in his research. Dutch is a difficult language for an English speaker, and it is unlikely that he gained sufficient proficiency to read original documents.⁶

One chapter in the book, "The West India Company's Loyal Employee," is devoted to Stuyvesant's service in the Caribbean before the authors turned their attention to New Amsterdam. The section covering the attack on Sint Maarten and Stuyvesant's amputation, if not entirely written by Kessler, was certainly based on his research and conclusions.

At some point between 1952 and 1959, Kessler abandoned his earlier thesis that the amputation was delayed for some eight months until Stuyvesant returned to Holland. He now concluded that the procedure "could have been done at any time during the siege of St. Martin or could have awaited the return to more favorable conditions back in Curaçao."

Kessler based his new conclusion on analysis of the limited historical record and his own experience as an orthopedic surgeon. Although no contemporary report or description of the surgery has ever been found, Kessler constructed the most likely scenario. He began by challenging the notion that the cannonball had severed the leg, despite Stuyvesant's own note to the Company citing "the loss of my right leg, it being removed by a rough [cannon] ball." In Kessler's view, such a wound would have caused massive bleeding, "which only a tourniquet could have controlled, and tourniquets were not yet in general use. Chances are that his leg was smashed, causing a compound fracture [i.e., bone fragments visibly protruding through the skin] of the bones below the knee." Infection was inevitable. Experience in the West Indies taught surgeons that "it is almost always fatal to operate in these Isles, they always mortify [become infected or gangrenous] most furiously and the patient's condition being already lowered



Figure 10: A closeup of Stuyvesant's "pegleg" as it was interpreted in the statue in New York's Stuyvesant Square Park; the wooden leg lacks decoration, although Stuyvesant was known to apply silver embellishments.

Photograph courtesy Lindsay Oshman

by the enervating air, soon sinks to rally no more."

Kessler confirmed the role of apprentice-trained barber surgeons, overseen by guilds, in limb amputations, both in Holland and in the Caribbean colonies. Instructions to Dutch East India Company surgeons (and in all likelihood Dutch West India Company surgeons) required that a man facing amputation be informed of the high risk of death, give of his free will what we would now call informed consent, and prepare his soul for death, as "it is no small presumption to dismember the image of God."

The only technique available at the time was the "guillotine" amputation—the same procedure that had so distressed Kessler in the South Pacific. A below-knee guillotine amputation in Stuyvesant's time involved a straight cut with a non-sterile knife through skin, muscle, nerves, and blood vessels, followed by the application of a bone saw. Bleeding was controlled by cauterization with hot irons or boiling oil. Alcohol and possibly a crude opium preparation may have been used as analgesics. Speed was of the essence. Many victims died of blood loss and shock during surgery. In survivors, the scar healed over many weeks with painful dressing changes and the continuing threat of fatal infection.⁷

CONVALESCENCE AND REHABILITATION

Well aware of the importance of a positive outlook in rehabilitation of the disabled, Kessler observed, "Though Stuyvesant attributed his recovery entirely to the power of prayer, it is also apparent, in view of the circumstances of the amputation, that the strength of his will and character was formidable. . . ." Kessler never learned exactly where and when the prosthesis was manufactured; the best limbmakers may well have worked in major European cities outside Holland. In all likelihood, Stuyvesant did not travel far from Amsterdam or Leiden for the fitting of his pegleg, whether domestic or imported (Figure 10).

As Stuyvesant convalesced in Holland, he was regaled by a poem composed by a friend from the Curaçao days.⁸ Perhaps it reads better in Dutch:

What a frantic thunder-ball falls roaring on your leg,
My dear friend Stuyvesant, and throws you down to earth?
The right hand pillar that your body used to bear,
In one blow crushed, is thus irreparable struck off.
You stood too much exposed. Oh all too cruel lot!
My Stuyvesant who falls and stumbles at his post,
Were he, a valiant soldier, was challenging the foe,
And lured him to the field, on the island of St. Martin.

Kessler took a broad view of rehabilitation; in addition to surgical and prosthetic measures, psychological support and



Figure 11: The dynamic statue of Peter Stuyvesant in Stuyvesant Square Park was created by sculptor Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in the late 1930s and unveiled in 1941. The statue of Peter Stuyvesant at the cruise terminal on Sint Maarten appears to be a very close copy or possibly a recasting of the New York statue.

Photograph courtesy Lindsay Oshman

vocational guidance were critical. Stuyvesant, of course, had no rehabilitation in the modern sense and he wasn't the sort of "compliant" fellow who would have responded well to a psychologist or social worker or even a physical therapist, had such professionals existed at the time.

Stuyvesant's overarching ambition and self-assurance were not diminished by his amputation. He was an elegant dresser: "slashed hose fastened at the knee by a knotted scarf, a velvet jacket with slashed sleeves over a full puffed shirt, and rosettes upon his shoes." Despite Calvinist austerity, he was said to have mounted a silver band around the top of his pegleg, earning the nickname "Old Silver Leg." Other accounts mention silver nails decorating the wooden leg and the nickname "Old Silver Nails."⁹ Kessler might have observed that Stuyvesant rehabilitated himself (Figure 11).

DIRECTOR GENERAL AND A NOD TO JERSEY CITY

In 1647, Stuyvesant was appointed Director General of the Dutch Colony of New Netherland, with its capital in New Amsterdam. His rehabilitation seems to have been complete: Despite his vow to the citizens that he would "govern you as a father his children," he ruled New Netherland with an iron fist. It was said that he banged his wooden leg on the floor whenever he thought his authority was threatened. He feuded with Lutherans, Catholics, Jews, Quakers, Native Americans (though it was said he was kind to some), Swedes in New Sweden, the English in New England, independent-minded patroons, the Dutch in Fort Orange (Albany), most of the Dutch citizens of New Amsterdam, and his own nine-member citizens' council. He was a Calvinist and a Company man, avowing: "We derive our authority from God and



Figure 12: Stuyvesant statue in Jersey City (at one of its former locations) was created by J. Massey Rhind, who also sculpted the statue of George Washington in Newark's Washington Park. A reporter mentioned the statue's "high-heeled leather clogged foot and peg-studded wooden prosthesis leg."

www.nj.com/hudson/2011/02/legends_landmarks_the_statue_o.html
 Photograph courtesy Hudson Reporter

the Company, not from a few ignorant subjects."

Eighteen years after he grudgingly surrendered New Amsterdam to a powerful British fleet and thirty-eight years after an unknown barber surgeon sawed off his leg aboard ship at Sint Maarten or later in Curaçao, Peter Stuyvesant died at the Bouverie, his farm estate just north of the wall he had erected in 1652 to defend New Amsterdam's northern border.

At least one New Jersey town—Jersey City—remembered Stuyvesant fondly, at least by Stuyvesant standards. In 1660, he granted permission for Dutch settlers to establish the village of Bergen on the present site of Bergen Square—the oldest permanent European settlement in the future state of New Jersey. A statue of Stuyvesant, commissioned in the sescentennial year 1910, was unveiled at the site of the little settlement that became Jersey City in 1820. After some inglorious moves and repairs, it now stands at the Hudson Community College Culinary Arts Plaza Park (Figure 12).¹⁰



ENDNOTES

1. Guillotine amputations are used today for infected limbs or in mass trauma situations. The guillotine amputation involves a straight incision through tissue and bone without creation of skin flaps that facilitate immediate closure and rapid fitting of a prosthesis.
2. Stuyvesant's birthdate is generally stated as 1592, although no birth or baptismal record has been found. The stone marker, placed on his vault at St. Mark's Church in the Bowery a century after his death, cites 1592. However, Kessler and Rachlis cite a document that places Stuyvesant's birth at 1610 or 1611, making his age at the time of his amputation as 33 or 34 and his age on arrival in New Amsterdam as 36 or 37 and his age of death 71 or 72.
3. The Stuyvesant statue (which appears to be a copy or a recasting of the statue at Stuyvesant Square in New York City) stands at the ship terminal on Sint Maarten, now the Dutch half of the island shared with French Saint Martin.

<http://freephotooftheday.com/2011/01/24/pieter-stuyvesant-statue-philipsburg-st-maarten/>

4. It is unclear from Kessler's notes whether professional prosthetics societies in Holland in the 1950s were still referred to as guilds.
5. R.W.G. Vail, "Old Pegleg the Brave," *New York Times*, May 24, 1959.
6. Holland Society of New York, *Die Halve Maen* 34:1 (1959).
7. Henry H. Kessler and Eugene Rachlis, *Peter Stuyvesant and His New York*. (New York: Random House, 1959), 47–50.
8. *Ibid.*, 50.
9. James Grant Wilson and John Fiske, eds. *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*. (New York: Appleton and Co., 1900), 5:736.
10. Information about the present location of the park courtesy Jersey Room, Jersey City Public Library.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Henry Howard Kessler, M.D. papers, 1912–1980. MC/37, Special Collections in the History of Medicine, Rutgers University Libraries, Newark;
https://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/history_of_medicine/manuscripts/kessler1.
- Kessler, Henry H. *The Knife is Not Enough*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1968.
- Kessler, Henry H. and Eugene Rachlis. *Peter Stuyvesant and His New York*. New York: Random House, 1959.
- Wilson, James Grant and John Fiske, eds. *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, 5:735–37. New York: D. Appleton and Co.