

# Maritime museum gets 257-year-old Bible

by Anthony J. Howard

Before there was a church in West Sayville, before there was a community of any sort, there was Willem and Maria Tuckers Bible.

When the Tucker's emigrated from Holland in 1854, settling first in Oakdale, then in the area that is now West Sayville, they brought with them all their possessions. But none were more important to these devoutly religious settlers than the family Bible.

The Tuckers, who changed their name from Fokker, moved to what is now Atlantic Avenue on land owned by Samuel Greene. As the Dutch community of West Sayville grew up around them, that Bible was their guide to daily affairs, both religious and secular. Before the settlers were able to build a house of worship, the Bible was their church, rotating from home to home every Sunday.

Now the Dutch Staten Bijbel (State Bible), printed in 1737, belongs to the Long Island Maritime Museum, a gift from the Tuckers' nonagenarian grandson Myron Van Essendelft. The Bible will be on permanent display at the West Sayville museum, a divine artifact of the local maritime heritage.

For the last 35 years, the Bible has occupied a space on Van Essendelft's bookshelf. Prior to that, his mother and Tucker's daughter, Nellie Van Essendelft, had it in her home. But the lifelong resident and 1926 graduate of Sayville High School wanted to give the good book a safe home for eternity.

"Me and my wife are childless, so who else could we give it to? If we gave it to either of the two [local Reformed] churches, one of them might have been offended," he said.

Grateful for the priceless piece of local history, museum director Dick Olcott likened the Bible to another recent gift of a maritime nature, a sextant that it shares shelf space with. "They're both instruments of navigation. Both the Bible and the sextant helped guide people through life," he said.

"When Mike and his family offered the Bible to us,



Myron Van Essendelft, left, presents Long Island Maritime Museum Director Richard Olcott with the 257-year-old family Bible that Willem Tucker brought with him when he settled in West Sayville.

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we were extremely grateful. It absolutely fits in with the collection of local history we have here at the museum," Olcott said.

Written completely in Dutch, the Bible is an imposing book, as large and heavy as a tool box, with a leather-wrapped oak binding and heavy Gothic lettering. Like almost all of his neighbors, Willem Tucker was a bayman, making his living on the water. Even his five daughters worked on the bay, raking clams for food and commerce.

The Tuckers and other early Dutch settlers were so

poor, they didn't even have homes to live in their first few years. Tucker built the first home in West Sayville. For the first half dozen years there was no church, just the Bible. "This was the only thing they had," Van Essendelft said. "They looked to this Bible to settle any problem or issue that came up in their lives."

Ultimately, the Bible will be enclosed in a climate-controlled display case in the museum. The museum will also pay to have an expert examine the book to determine the feasibility and the wisdom of restoring the Bible. ■

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