



Figure 13.

The Commissioners

13. Simeon De Witt

Ezra Ames, *Portrait of Simeon De Witt*, ca. 1804.

Oil on canvas (168 x 137.5 cm). Collection Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, Gift of the Grandchildren of Simeon De Witt, 0016. Photo by Jack Abraham

Simeon De Witt (1756–1834) was born in Ulster County and descended from early Dutch settlers of the mid-Hudson region. Trained in surveying as a youth, he gained early distinction making maps for George Washington during the Revolution, ultimately becoming Geographer and Surveyor of the Continental Army. After the war, De Witt settled in Albany, where he served for a half century until his death as the surveyor-general of New York State. During this extraordinary tenure De Witt oversaw the state's transformation from a largely unsettled wilderness to a widespread commercial and industrial power. His 1802 state map set a

standard for American cartography. De Witt declined appointment as surveyor-general of the United States (1796), but while serving on the Manhattan street commission he eagerly accepted a position (1810) on the first state commission exploring a cross-state canal to Lake Erie; surveys he ordered proved the transformative Erie Canal possible.

De Witt was not a profound thinker and his scholarship was limited, but his unrivaled mapping and surveying experience made him a logical choice for the street commission. Given his extensive record laying rectilinear grids elsewhere in the state, De Witt was the likeliest among the commissioners to propose and promote a regular grid for Manhattan. De Witt was responsible for the hiring of his like-minded young Albany protégé, John Randel, Jr., to serve as the commission's chief surveyor; Randel was an avid proponent of the grid plan.

There is no record of specific contributions by each of the three commissioners over the four years of their service, but from Common

Council records we can estimate that De Witt put in roughly 250 days, or about five days a month. He was paid about one thousand dollars for his actual working days in the city, at the state-mandated four dollars per day. De Witt apparently did not relish his Manhattan days. He sought payment for the Sundays he had to spend in the city; the council rejected Sabbath pay. He scrupulously noted four years of travel expenses between Albany and New York; these the council grudgingly paid. It had an easier time with local and wealthy commissioners Morris and Rutherford: they served for free. GK