

Who Were the Commissioners?

The three commissioners were prominent men with achievements relevant to their task to lay out New York City's future. Gouverneur Morris and his half-nephew-in-law John Rutherford were wealthy lifetime residents of the New York City area with long histories in land administration and business affairs. Albany resident Simeon De Witt was among the most accomplished surveyors in the country.

A more difficult question is why they were commissioners. There is no record of why these three men were selected, who selected or promoted them, who else, if anyone, was under consideration, whether they or other possible commissioners solicited their own appointments, or what prior understandings there might have been between these three men and the city whose interests they were commissioned to serve. All we have about the selection of the 1811 commissioners is the memorial from the Common Council to the state legislature recommending De Witt, Morris, and Rutherford "as fit and proper persons to be appointed."

Contrast this state commission, looking into the city's future streets, with the contemporaneous state commission looking into creation of the Erie Canal. Morris and De Witt served on both. Their selection to the canal commission in 1810, three years into their street commission service, is amply documented in state and city records and other primary materials.

Similarly, while there is a relatively ample record of the canal commission's actions and decision-making from annual and interim reports, publicly noted meetings, legislative activity, newspaper accounts, and manuscript materials, the record is almost blank on the activities of the street commission. For the commission that made New York the Empire State we have a very good idea of which commissioners did what and why; for the commission that made New York the model of urban order in America we have barely a clue. The 1807 law that created the commission required no meetings, no progress reports, not even a formal final report. The law required only, in four years time, a map in triplicate "accompanied with such field notes and elucidatory remarks as the nature of the subject may require." With such ambiguity it is no wonder that any record of the commission's decision-making evaporated in informal, private arrangements.

Though this was ostensibly a state commission there are no state materials and relatively few mentions of the commission's progress, even in city records; these documents are mostly bills submitted to and paid by the Common Council. Outside of bits of explication in the eleven manuscript pages of "Explanatory Remarks" accompanying the commission's map, nothing in the

official public record explains or illuminates how or why the commission chose the street system it did.

Newspaper reporting, other than surprisingly cursory announcements of the commission's formation and its conclusion, is nonexistent. The archival record is of no more help. Rutherford and De Witt left no papers that amplify their roles. Even Morris's voluminous personal papers for the period carry more details of his fishing exploits, dinner guests, and indispositions from gout and urinary blockage than the substance of his commission work. On Monday, June 29, 1807, Morris recorded in his diary: "Meet with De Witt one of the Comm[issioners] and do business." The specifics of the business on that early and presumably important day in their tenure and on dozens of other days with similarly opaque entries over the intervening four years is entirely unknown. On Tuesday, June 21, 1808, for example: "Go immediately after Breakfast to attend the Board of Commissioners—A pretty long Sitting." And presumably, if it was pretty long, pretty important too. But we are unlikely ever to know. And finally, on Thursday, March 28, 1811: "Raw damp and NEast Wind. Go to town on Business of the Comm[ission] to lay out Manhattan Island—Dine with Mr. Rutherford and execute the Maps—Much indisposed [from gout]." Thus, on the day Morris signed off on the great grid, we learn about the weather and his wellbeing and nothing about the magnitude of the occasion.

Gerard Koepfel