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FFI Global Conference Keynote Speaker Barnet Schechter

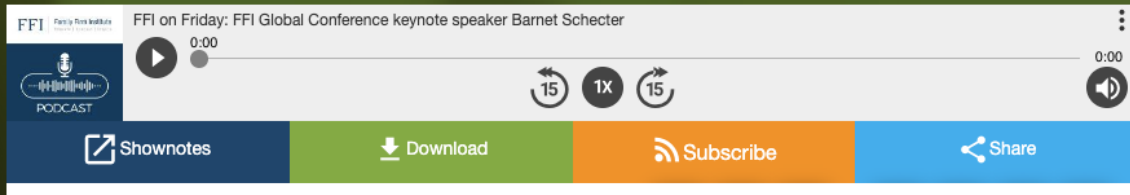
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In keeping with FFI's longstanding commitment to the importance of history and narrative for enterprising families, practitioners, and researchers in the field, we are pleased to offer this podcast interview featuring Barnet Schechter, an independent historian whose books include *The Battle for New York: The City at the Heart of the American Revolution*. He is delivering a keynote at the FFI Global Conference in October, entitled "It's A Family Affair: Conquering New York, from Revolution to Rising Seas." We think that this conversation with Jordan Rich is a perfect example of the 2023 conference theme, "Evolving the Conversation: The Future of Family Enterprise Advising and Research."

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Listen to Keynote Speaker Barnet Schecter's Conversation with Jordan Rich

Podcast Transcript

Jordan Rich (JR): Welcome to today's *FFI on Friday*. I'm Jordan Rich, and we are pleased to feature Barnet Schecter, an independent historian whose books include *The Battle for New York: The City at the Heart of the American Revolution*. He is delivering a keynote at the FFI Global Conference in October, entitled "It's A Family Affair: Conquering New York, from Revolution to Rising Seas." Welcome to you, Barnet. Just mentioning the title of your talk has me thinking of, what else, the song "It's a Family Affair."

Barnet Schecter (BS): That's right. 1971.

JR: Sly and the Family Stone.

BS: It's all about the drama of raising a family, and I'm sure that's what a lot of family firms experience—struggles of bringing up the next generation, sibling rivalry...

JR: It is a family, and it's a macrocosm of what a family is all about. Talk a bit with us first about the subject of geology and how this enters into the study of [New York City,] this great "city that never sleeps"?

BS: For New York City, geology is destiny. It's a port city, above all, for most of its history. It's been a maritime city—that, in turn, has led to its leading role in manufacturing and industry, but also in culture and ideas. It's constantly getting a fresh infusion of diverse population, of immigrants from all over the world coming and building new lives. That's why I have titled my talk "Conquering New York, from Revolution to Rising Seas," because in a sense, each generation of immigrants comes to New York to succeed and to "conquer" in their own fashion, whether it's an invading army or a family business that wants to create a restaurant or another business that they want to hand down to successive generations.

Geology comes into play in the sense that it's what creates the potential for a major world port. When we go back about 50,000 years, we look at the sheet of ice a mile thick that rolled down from the north and scraped and scrubbed the landscape, gouging out New York's waterways, the rivers and harbors. Where it stopped—at the terminal moraine, where the glacier stopped moving—it deposited a ridge of debris and rock. Then as the eons progressed and that ice melted, it created a vast lake. The lake, the pressure of that water, broke through and created a gap, which we now call the Verrazzano-Narrows, where we have a bridge. That gap is really the main entryway into New York's Upper Bay, and its connection to the Atlantic Ocean. So you have this city at the mouth of the Hudson River which has access 300 miles into the rivers and lakes of the interior and becomes a depot of trade that can then reach the rest of the world.

JR: So thanks to geology and nature, we have a perfect mix of conditions that has created a thriving metropolis. And it was that way even when the Dutch decided to settle in, right? As well as the British. They all saw the value of it, perhaps not knowing how great it would become.

BS: Absolutely. Henry Hudson arrives in 1609 on the *Half Moon*, and then the Dutch settled New Amsterdam (later called New York) in 1624 and established a trading post, Fort Orange, in what is now the city of Albany, the state capital, trading furs with the Iroquois and with the Lenape in the immediate area. And of course, speaking of “conquering” New York, the British come along and take it from the Dutch about forty years later. It changes hands again between the British and the Dutch in 1673, but then eventually we get a hundred years of British rule, until the [American] Revolution. In both of those cases [the Dutch and the British], the city at the mouth of the Hudson, with this great protected harbor, and at the same time access to the Atlantic, became a great locus of trade. For the British, it became part of their mercantile system, where they were able to exploit raw materials of the continent and have a market for their expensive manufactured goods. It became part of a triangular trade with the sugar islands of the Caribbean, where the food from New York’s farms was shipped down from the city, it supplied food to the sugar islands so they could produce their cash crop and make huge profits on sugar, and in turn ship it to America where it was made into rum, which in turn was traded for enslaved people in Africa. So you can start to see New York drawn into this global role because of its strategic location at the center of the Atlantic seaboard and at the mouth of this great river.

JR: There’s a play called the *Lehman Trilogy*, which I just saw recently. What I learned [from it] was that industries grew up based on the slave trade—for example, textiles—and New York was where these industries blossomed. The materials came from other places, but New York put it into practice, and the Lehmans are one example of a family that was able to succeed in that regard.

BS: New York, in many ways—as well as all of the northern British colonies — were implicated, were complicit in the trade and practice of slavery, because they propped it up. They supported it with their manufacturing, with their loans of money, and as you say, with production of textiles that clothed the slaves. By the time you get to the Civil War in America, New York City and its many family businesses as you mentioned, are deeply involved in the “cotton kingdom.” The two economies of New York and the South are deeply enmeshed, and we start to see that influence the city’s politics in a powerful way. It’s almost a kind of secret history that many Americans don’t know, but New York City was an anti-war hotbed during the Civil War. The city never voted for Abraham Lincoln the two times he was elected President! In fact, the largest [and] deadliest riots in American history erupted on the streets of New York in 1863 in direct response to the first federal draft of soldiers. It was also very much in response to Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation [and] the freeing of the slaves. It really was an outcry against the vast changes that Lincoln was bringing.

JR: There’s so much here to dig into. I want to ask you about the borough system: the fact that it’s New York City, but it’s actually different enclaves of individuals, customs, mores, and businesses. The system seems to have worked well. Was it innovative in its time, and was it an effective way to divvy up the city back then?

BS: We should say that the city was consolidated in 1898, when Manhattan joined with Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island to form one city of Greater New York. I think a lot of efficiencies were gained and it seems to be a successful experiment to this day. Although I think there are some things that we can mention that might work better than they do. In 1904, the first subway was opened in New York, and it expanded in the succeeding decades. That had the positive effect of relieving a lot of overcrowding in the slums of lower Manhattan, where the tenements had grown up, and it enabled people to form, as you mention, these different ethnic enclaves in what Manhattanites would call “the outer boroughs.” That certainly had a positive effect, but as we’re seeing today, particularly after we’re evaluating the effects of the pandemic, we’re starting to realize that being out in Queens somewhere and having to go to work in Manhattan may not be the ideal solution for raising a family or maybe running a family business. I think that when you look at what the governor [Gov. Kathy Hochul] and the mayor [Mayor Eric Adams] are saying today, in terms of getting the city back on its feet post-pandemic, I think there’s a sense that the five boroughs need to become more equal, in the sense that we need to develop business centers in a less centralized way, to serve more people more equitably.

JR: Family business, as well as any business, thrives on innovation. One thing about New York, and I know you’re so well-versed in this area, the innovation that the city has brought to the world. And I’m going to mention the Brooklyn Bridge, it was a wonder of the world at the time, and the idea of creating the Erie Canal, so many things that had their heartbeat in the New York area. This says a lot about the innovation and the innovative spirit of New York, doesn’t it?

BS: Absolutely. That goes back to what we started with, New York as a world port. It's bringing in commerce from far-flung places, but it's also bringing in new people, new ideas. You mentioned the Brooklyn Bridge—the Roebings, there's a family dynasty in a sense, designing the bridge and handing it down to [the] son. I think when we think about innovation in New York, we also think about major families who've left a lasting mark on the city. We think of, before the Civil War, John Jacob Astor is the richest man. Later, we see the Morgan banking dynasty come up, the Guggenheims, and so on. [J.P.] Morgan, in particular, was innovating in new ways of developing business. Morgan was financing mergers and creating huge corporations in railroads, in steel, in communications (American Telegraph). So these huge family dynasties also helped drive some of that innovation by creating new ways of doing business.

JR: Family businesses have morphed and changed with the times economically, but you can also look at the arts and realize that it's a family of artists bringing some of the greatest art in the world—theater, music, dance, visual art—it's a center for culture, for diversity in that regard as well. New York is constantly going through growing pains, even today, Barney, with crime on the rise and issues of homelessness that all cities face. But there's something about New York that is very cyclical in a positive nature. Post-9/11, New York City bounced back like no other city could ever bounce back. What is that special something that New York City seems to have, in your estimation?

BS: I think that's absolutely right—New York has constantly had to reinvent itself and make opportunities from crisis. If you look back to the American Revolution, the city was conquered by the British in 1776, occupied under military rule for seven years, during which time a quarter of the city burned down. People lived in hovels, in ruins, in tents, for seven years. And the city, like a phoenix, grew out of the ashes into the early nineteenth century and became this great port, and then the city lost its status as a port in the twentieth century. Containerization came along, the shipping industry changed, and everything moved elsewhere, to New Jersey. All the warehouses closed in New York. What has New York done [with them]? It's created these wonderful public spaces—Brooklyn Bridge Park, Hudson River Park. It has reevaluated its relationship to the natural world around it. It's a wonderful archipelago of islands, with all kinds of opportunities for public space and public engagement. The city has always reinvented itself, moved forward in a positive way, and a lot of that has to do with its people. There was slavery here, there were brutal repressions of the Native [American] population, but to some extent, New York has always had a tolerant or diverse ethos. Starting with the Dutch, because it was founded by the Dutch West India Company, which said, "You can come here, work for the company, make money for the company, and we don't care what your religion is or your creed, we're interested in having a company town." Oddly, that has led to a kind of a diversity, a pluralism that has become part of New York's DNA as a city.

JR: It's a great conversation that you'll be having in more detail in the fall at the FFI Conference. I wanted to conclude by asking you your thoughts on the future, not just economically but structurally and geologically. Many scientists believe that global warming will affect the tides and rising seas. What impact does that have on a future New York and what families are thinking about as they think about their generations to come?

BS: Obviously, civic leaders are starting to think about this. The pandemic exposed certain fault lines or problems that are not unrelated to the climate crisis. The city is starting to make plans and ecologists, scientists are looking forward and saying, "What becomes of an archipelago, of a group of islands [under these conditions]?" [A recent article] said that the weight of New York's skyscrapers is causing the city to sink at about a millimeter a year, [which is] a staggering thought. But also there's the idea that we need to reestablish wetlands to absorb the storm surges. We need to recreate some of the natural terrain, the creeks and rivers where storm waters should naturally flow into to prevent flooding. These kinds of ideas are being put forward. There is a wonderful book called *Mannahatta* by Eric Sanderson, which looks at Manhattan four hundred years ago, in 1609, and four hundred years from now. One of his conclusions is that we may have to take a page from the Lenape, the Native Americans who were the first inhabitants of this area, and start to go back to nature—to have more urban farms, green buildings that have rooftop gardens and other ways of absorbing light and rainfall. It's a vision of New York that is still a densely populated city, but one that is more self-sufficient in terms of producing food and reducing its carbon footprint by the transfer of materials that come in and out of the city. It's a re-envisioning—and I think this dovetails with what the mayor and the governor are talking about right now—transforming our public spaces so that there is more pedestrian traffic, there are more mixed-use business districts where old skyscrapers are being turned into residential buildings. People [can work] closer to where they live. It's going to be a greener, more smog-free world.

JR: And as New York goes, so goes many of the cities in the nation, including the one I'm broadcasting in right now, Boston. We've taken a lot of lead from New York City, as many do. Thank you for your wisdom and insight, and exuberance about this topic. I think a lot of people are going to love hearing from you.

BS: Thank you so much, Jordan. My pleasure.

JR: Our thanks to Barnet Schecter for this fascinating discussion about New York City's past and future, and how they influenced the city's family enterprises. It'll be the subject of his keynote speech at the upcoming FFI Global Conference, which brings together thought leaders from around the world to share their latest work and research in the family enterprise field. To learn more, visit www.ffi.org. Have a great day, and thank you for listening!

References

¹ Parsons, T., Wu, P., Wei, M., & D'Hondt, S. (2023). The Weight of New York City: Possible Contributions to Subsidence from Anthropogenic Sources. *Earth's Future*, 11(5), e2022EF003465. <https://doi.org/10.1029/2022EF003465>

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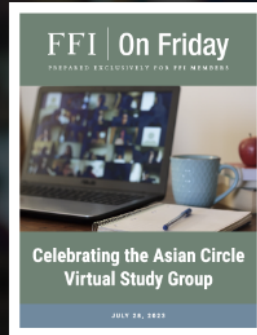
About the Contributors



Barnet Schecter, an independent historian, is the author of *The Battle for New York: The City at the Heart of the American Revolution* and *George Washington's America: A Biography Through His Maps* and is contributor to the *Encyclopedia of New York City*. In addition to lecturing and leading tours, he consults on books, exhibitions, and films and appears on the History Channel and C-SPAN. He is currently writing a book about anti-slavery activity during the Revolution and the founding era. He holds a BA in history from Yale University.

INTERVIEWER: Jordan Rich is celebrating a quarter century at one of America's top legacy radio stations, interviewing thousands of celebrities, authors, actors, and interesting personalities throughout his career. Jordan is co-owner of Chart Productions Inc. and teaches voice-over acting. His main focus these days is in podcast creation and production, featuring conversations with the world's most creative people.

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