As Directress General for the Society of Daughters of Holland Dames, Mary Woodfill Park is very enthusiastic about her new leadership role in the organization, and about the coming year.

“I really love what I’m doing, and enjoy the honor and challenge of being Directress General,” says Mary, who became a member of the Holland Dames in 2002. “We have a very exciting year coming up with the 2009 Henry Hudson Quadricentennial, which promises many unique events and opportunities to learn about our Dutch heritage, history, art and culture.

“Our Board of Directors and Committee members inspire me! Collectively, we have an impressive range of expertise and abilities, and with the Internet and ‘lots of good will,’ we can be efficient in communicating and making decisions. As a result, we are seeing a growing number of new Members and Associates, we have an active web site, and a newsletter that keeps our members in touch with what we are doing throughout the year. A pet project this year to commemorate the Henry Hudson Quadricentennial, is a Limited Edition scarf with images of the early Dutch New Netherland. I believe our Dutch ancestors would be quite amazed!”

So how does Mary do it all?

“Let’s just say that I am very passionate about the rich legacy of the Dutch in early America!” she smiles. “I also appreciate and enjoy the warm camaraderie that comes from knowing we all share a common Dutch DNA. It is a very grounding experience in our fast-paced world, with so much uncertainty, to have a common connection so far back in time. Not all lineage societies can do this. We are the ‘first families’ of New York.”

Mary’s Dutch roots go back to her qualifying ancestor Abraham Rycken (now spelled Riker) who was born in Lent, Gelderland in 1619, and sailed to the New World in 1642. Upon his arrival in New Amsterdam, Abraham received a patent (or title) for property on Broad and Beaver Streets, which was appropriate since he, like many new settlers, was a beaver trader.

“Beaver pelts were the currency of the day during Abraham’s time period in New Amsterdam,” says Mary. “There was tremendous demand for their thick, silky pelts. Back in the Netherlands, which in the 17th century was the most prosperous country in Europe, beaver hats and coats were the height of fashion.”

In 1667, Abraham Rycken was granted ownership of a small island in the East River that bears his name to this very day. He is buried in Astoria, Queens, along with several generations of his descendants, and part of his original house still stands next to the cemetery. Protected and preserved, it is now known as the Riker-Lent House.
“Many of Abraham Rycken’s descendent, including one in my line, who served in the American Revolution, moved westward,” says Mary. “They were part of the early migration. They wanted to have a settlement of their own to preserve their religious identity and culture. First, they settled a Dutch colony in Pennsylvania called Conewago, and many then traveled to Kentucky, to settle around Harrodsburg. Sadly, ancestors in this Dutch migration were killed and scalped by Indians. A few years ago I began collecting the remarkable stories of related early Dutch families and a life goal is to write my family history about these early Dutch settlers.”

From her research so far, Mary has discovered that her Colonial Dutch ancestors in New Amsterdam include a constable, a planter, a fur trader, a tavern owner, a ferryman, a schepen (or magistrate), a deacon, an elder, a surveyor of highways, a school teacher and numerous a pew holders in the Dutch Reformed Church. In addition to Ryken, Mary has discovered direct family names such as Verveelen, Van Blarcom, Van Boerum, Wiltsee, Smock, Hendricks, Mandeville, Harmens, and Demarest and Fontaine (French Huguenots whose families intermarried with the Dutch.)

Mary’s interest in genealogical research and lineage societies was sparked over a decade ago when she offered to assist her mother-in-law, Alice Crandall (Mrs. Lee I.) Park, a genealogist, who was writing her fifth family history book when she began to lose her vision from age-related macular degeneration.

“While helping Alice with her research, I became much more aware of and interested in my own Dutch history,” says Mary. “It was such a thrill for all of us when she became a member of the Holland Dames at 102 years of age! We were able to enjoy being members of the Holland Dames together for more than two years, until Alice’s death at age 104 ½ years old.” (Her qualifying ancestor was Roelof Martense Schenck, and she also claims Van Kouwenhoven, Van Voorhees and Van Dyke as direct Dutch ancestors.)

“Alice was an inspiration to her family and friends,” Mary says, “and because she lived such a long, productive life, she tied all of her family stories together and put them on paper to be recorded forever for posterity.”

A graduate of Marywood College with a B.A. in English Literature and a B.S. in Library Science, Mary began her early career as a corporate librarian in the investment community. After working for a series of investment firms, she eventually started her own firm providing business research services for companies and individuals. She is listed in Who’s Who in America, and is the author of *InfoThink: Practical Strategies for Using Information in Business* (Scarecrow Press 1998), which continues to be used as a library textbook. “Basically, my book is about information,” Mary explains, “how to find it, use it, and organize it to make informed business decisions.”

Mary, who has resided in Baltimore for thirty-five years, is the mother of two sons from a previous marriage, two stepsons, and three step-grandchildren. Her husband of 25 years, Dr. Lee Crandall Park, is a graduate of Yale University and the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, and is a member of the faculty at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine as well as a practicing psychiatrist specializing in personality disorders.

“My first husband was from India,” says Mary, “and our children are spread out all over the world – from Munich to Mumbai. Their professions are equally diverse – one is a professor of Neurosciences, another is a language expert, and the other two work in Finance. Lee and I are very proud of them all.” (Mary spent over 25 year as a lacrosse mom and that is one of her proudest achievements!)

Mary’s husband, Lee, is a moving force behind her work with various lineage societies and they share a keen sense of patriotism and special love for the American flag.

“I’ll never forget marching in the 2002 Flag Day Parade in New York City after September 11, 2001,” recalls Mary. “I was carrying the flag for the Daughters of Holland Dames for the first time, and it was pouring rain, but that didn’t matter. There were so many people, young and old, all lined up cheering and waving flags along the parade route. Accompanying us were the uniformed New York City Police, and the New York Fire Department with their trucks and flashing lights. We all ended up downtown at
Fraunces Tavern to hear schoolchildren from all five City Boroughs sing patriotic songs. I have not witnessed such an outpouring of heartfelt patriotism before or since. While marching I was thinking about my Dutch ancestors who had walked those very lower Manhattan streets, who had made their homes there, baptized their children in the Fort, and carried on their daily lives and businesses more than 350 years earlier. It was an incredibly moving event on many levels.”

A civic-minded volunteer in her local community, Mary also currently serves on the Board of Baltimore’s renowned Star-Spangled Banner Flag House and Museum.

Although Mary is a sophisticated world traveler, published author, and no stranger to big-city life (she loves New York), she is at heart a self-described “country girl,” and lover of the great outdoors. She is a native of rural western Missouri where she spent her childhood. “It was really quite beautiful there, just on the edge of the Great Plains, with wide open skies. My father was an old-fashioned country eye doctor,” says Mary. “My parents instilled in me the meaning of hard work, commitment, and a strong love of the land.”

Today, Mary and her family enjoy regular summer visits to their rustic cabin in Fishtail, Montana, where they ride horseback, camp, fish and hike in the Rocky Mountains.

“Although I’ve also had the pleasure of hiking in the Italian Alps,” says Mary, “my heart belongs to Montana and the Beartooths. Our families have been going there for 50 years. After our original cabin burned down in 2002, we decided to re-build it. The old cabin was in what has now been designated an official Wilderness area. The new cabin is on a high plain, looking out over the nearby Beartooth Mountains. A contractor built the cabin’s main frame, but we all pitched in to build the rest. It is very primitive, with no plumbing or electricity yet. Lee and I were assigned the task of helping to lay stone and mortar for the cabin’s great room.”

In August, Mary and Lee and family members travel by horseback from Fishtail, to the site of their old cabin in the mountain wilderness, pitch a wall tent, and set up a campsite alongside the Stillwater River.

“We store our food in the river, which keeps it cool, and enjoy two weeks of hiking, fishing, watching wildlife (including bears) and reading,” says Mary. “No computers are allowed. It’s good for the soul.”

One can’t help but think that Abraham Rycken, Mary’s likewise industrious, accomplished, and adventuresome Dutch ancestor, would agree.