25PES

Remco Torenbosch

Holland Land Company

8-22 November 2026

The exhibition space has deliberately been left empty, with the physical presence of a single Gunter's chain as its only object. The chain refers to the surveying of the vast territories acquired by the Holland Land Company in Western New York at the end of the eighteenth century. Rather than illustrating this history through maps, documents, or images, the work reduces it to the presence of a single measuring device: an instrument through which land could be measured, divided, described, and transformed into parcels that could be owned, exchanged, and speculated upon. The emptiness of the space amplifies the disproportion between this modest object and the territory it helped to make legible.

Developed in England in the seventeenth century by the mathematician Edmund Gunter, the Gunter's chain became a fundamental instrument for surveying land. Its standard length of 66 feet, divided into 100 links, provided a precise system for measuring distance and establishing boundaries. In the context of the Holland Land Company, such a system was essential to transforming millions of acres into an organised field of ranges, townships, and individual lots. The chain therefore represents more than a method of measurement: it was part of the material infrastructure through which an expansive landscape could be converted into a structured collection of properties.

This apparently neutral instrument played a crucial role in transforming territory into property. Surveying made vast and uneven landscapes commensurable: land could be measured, subdivided, described, registered, bought, sold, and speculated upon. Across North America, the geometric logic of surveying became embedded in colonial settlement, imposing grids of townships, roads, fields, and property boundaries onto territories already inhabited and governed by Indigenous peoples. Within the Holland Land Company, measurement similarly provided the means through which land acquired a financial legibility. The chain connected physical territory to systems of ownership, administration, valuation, and capital.

The particular Gunter's chain presented here was manufactured by Mathieson of Glasgow. Founded in Glasgow in 1792, the company became one of Scotland's important manufacturers of specialised tools, eventually operating from the Saracen Tool Works. Alexander Mathieson & Sons produced tools for industries including shipbuilding, engineering, carpentry, and surveying, becoming part of the industrial infrastructure of nineteenth-century Glasgow. The chain consequently connects two histories of measurement and expansion: the financial and territorial ambitions of the Holland Land Company, and the industrial culture of Glasgow in which precision tools were manufactured for an increasingly engineered world shaped by commerce, industry, and empire.

The chain forms part of a long-term research into the Holland Land Company, an Amsterdam-based consortium of Dutch banks and investors that acquired enormous areas of land in New York State and Pennsylvania during the 1790s. Working through the Amsterdam merchant and agent Théophile Cazenove, the investors treated American territory as an opportunity for development and speculation. In 1792 and 1793, they acquired more than three million acres in Western New York, an area that became known as the Holland Purchase. What was acquired as a vast territory subsequently had to be transformed into something that could be administered, divided, valued, and sold.

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Between 1798 and 1800, surveyors divided the Holland Purchase into ranges and townships, which were subsequently subdivided into individual lots. This geometric structure transformed millions of acres into a collection of measurable and transferable units. The survey was therefore not simply a preliminary technical exercise but an essential component of the company's financial operation. The Gunter's chain represents one of the instruments through which this transformation became possible: a physical device connecting landscape to measurement, measurement to property, and property to speculation. The act of surveying was simultaneously an act of financial abstraction.

The Holland Land Company is significant within the history of land speculation because it brought together distant territory, European investment, surveying, and financial calculation on an enormous scale. The Gunter's chain makes this relationship tangible. Its repeated links establish a standardised unit through which an expansive territory can be reduced to a calculable surface, while the resulting measurements allow land to enter systems of ownership and exchange. In this context, the chain is not simply an historical surveying instrument. It is a material trace of a process through which geography became property, property became an asset, and an American landscape became the object of European financial speculation.

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