Life in New Amsterdam Educator Resource Guide

MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Frederick A.O. Schwarz Children's Center

Russell Shorto Introducing New Amsterdam

Introducing New Amsterdam

One useful way to understand history is to forget "history" and instead think of the past in terms of archaeology. Think of layers of civilization, one on top of the other. Now imagine yourself with a shovel, standing on the surface. You begin digging into the layers of America's story, searching for its beginnings.

You dig through the 20th century, and reach the 19th, finding remnants of the era of horse-drawn buggies, of the Civil War, of the advent of steam-engines. You dig further, and come to the American Revolution: the powdered wigs, the muskets, the gentlemen in Philadelphia grandly inscribing their signatures to a document declaring their independence from Great Britain. This is it: the bedrock of American culture and history, the bottom layer.

But no, of course that is not true. Beneath the Revolution lies the colonial period, with its cities burgeoning, its tobacco plantations worked by slaves, its residents thinking of themselves not so much as Americans but as Virginians or Pennsylvanians or New Yorkers. *This,* then, surely, is the bedrock, the root of all later American history.

Actually, no. For the colonies of the 18th century have their roots in the 17th century. Many of these original European settlements — Virginia, the Massachusetts Bay Colony — were English. But not all of them were. This volume explores one of those earliest colonies, which was not founded by the English and which, though largely forgotten in the standard telling of American history, exerted an enormous influence on American culture. Its archaeological layer is to be found, among other places, on the island of Manhattan.

The colony was called New Netherland. It was founded by the Dutch, at the time when they had a great commercial empire that spanned the globe. New Netherland extended from north of present-day Albany, New York, all the way south to the Delaware River. It comprised all or parts of five future states: New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Pennsylvania and Delaware. Its capital was the city of New Amsterdam, at the southern tip of Manhattan Island. Its second city, Beverwijck, eventually became the English city of Albany.

I use archaeology as a metaphor for examining history because it helps to understand how important early "layers" can be for later history. In this case, New Netherland set the tone not only for New York, but for much of America.

The Dutch were very different from the English — and from everyone else in 17th century Europe. They had developed a distinct society, in part thanks to the fact that they lived on unstable soil. Society in much of Europe during the Middle Ages evolved out of the manorial system. This was centered on a manor house, or castle, owned by a nobleman. From here, the nobleman controlled a vast estate. Peasants worked this estate, and they paid the nobleman rent. The nobleman in turn paid homage to his king and his church. The manorial system was rigid: it didn't allow for much in the way of upward mobility.

The Dutch provinces developed differently. The country that is today the Netherlands is a vast river delta. Much of the land is below sea level. When it was settled, people formed small communal organizations to fight against the water. They built dams and dikes and reclaimed land from the sea. The new land was not owned by a nobleman: it was theirs. They parceled it up, and they began buying and selling it. They formed a rather modern economy, based in part on real estate. This allowed ordinary individuals to prosper in ways they could not under a manorial system. It encouraged them to innovate, to seek new opportunities. It empowered them as individuals.

This impulse toward innovation and individualism helped give rise to the great Dutch East India Company, which sent ships to Asia in search of products to exploit. It helped spawn the Dutch Golden Age, an era in which the Dutch brought forth advances in art, science, publishing, and other arenas.

OPPOSITE PAGE (TOP):
Nova Amsteldam. ca.1670. 38.512
OPPOSITE PAGE (BOTTOM):
Byron Company. Skyline of New York City from Staten Island Ferry Boat. 1932. 93.1.1.15179

ABOUT

Russel Shorto

I am lucky enough to make a living by writing books of narrative history. Strangely, though, I did not take a single history course in college. I think that was because I looked at history as political history — the doings of kings and armies and presidents — and I found that a bit boring. It turned out that I was deeply interested in the past, but I wanted to approach it in different ways. So, in college I took courses in art history and the history of philosophy, and I studied English literature as an approach to the history of the British Empire.

Many years later, I was living in New York City when my daughter was a toddler. The nearest open space for her to run and play was the churchyard of St. Mark's in the Bowery. I would go there with her and she would run around among the graves. It turned out that the tomb of Petrus Stuyvesant, the last director of New Netherland, is located there. As I read his tombstone, I became curious to dig deep into New York's Dutch beginnings. Eventually, I wrote a book about the subject.

Russell Shorto is the author of five books of history, which have won numerous awards and have been published in 14 languages. He also writes regularly for The New York Times.

As the East India Company flourished, and brought riches to the little country, and in particular to the city of Amsterdam, the wealthy merchants of the Dutch Republic decided to form a West India Company.

In those days, "West Indies" meant essentially everything to the west of Europe: the east coast of North America, the Caribbean islands, and the coast of South America. New Netherland was founded by the West India Company to get wealth out of North America — beaver pelts, tobacco, and other natural products — the way the East India Company had succeeded in Asia.

New Amsterdam, the capital of the colony, became a microcosm of Amsterdam. Like its parent, it was unusually mixed. Throughout Europe, intolerance was official policy, for it was held that in order for a society to be strong it had to encourage unity and reject differences, especially religious differences. But Amsterdam grew mighty in part by admitting people of different faiths and backgrounds. Likewise, New Amsterdam. In 1643, a visiting Jesuit priest commented that there were 18 languages being spoken in the city's streets, at a time when the population was probably not much more than 500. While Dutch tolerance was limited — Jews, Lutherans and Quakers all had to fight for inclusion, and it certainly did not apply to African slaves or American Indians — "tolerance" was nonetheless a watershed. It was codified in the de facto Dutch constitution, and it provided a social glue to bind together New Amsterdam's diverse population.

These two forces — a mixed society and an aggressive business environment — became fused into New Amsterdam's identity. Eventually, the English took over the colony of New Netherland. They changed the name: New Amsterdam became New York. They changed much else besides. But — returning to the archaeological metaphor — when we examine the earliest layer of New York City's foundations, we see the structures the Dutch settlers put in place. And, likewise, we see New Amsterdam in the New York City of today: a place of unparalleled cultural fusion and boundless business opportunity.

The essays in this volume explore the Dutch city that lies deep beneath the present metropolis. They reveal what daily life was like in New Amsterdam's streets, the role that slavery played, the relationship between its inhabitants and the Native Americans, what childhood was like, and how New Amsterdam functioned as a trading port. They give a vivid sense of what was, and in so doing help us to better understand what is.

Introducing New Amsterdam

Introducing the Topic

New Amsterdam was founded by the Dutch at the time when they had a great commercial empire that spanned the globe. The Dutch had become famous worldwide for their smart, aggressive business practices — practices that grew out of their culture's past and its relationship to water. Their impulse toward innovation and individualism helped give rise to the great Dutch East India Company, which sent ships to Asia in search of products to exploit. This helped spawn the Dutch Golden Age, an era in which the Dutch brought forth advances in art, science, publishing, and other arenas.

As the East India Company flourished the wealthy merchants of the Dutch Republic decided to form a West India Company. New Netherland was founded by the West India Company to get wealth out of North America, such as beaver pelts and tobacco. New Amsterdam, the capital of the colony, became a microcosm of Amsterdam. Like its parent, it was unusually mixed. Throughout Europe, intolerance was official policy, for it was held that in order for a society to be strong it had to encourage unity and reject differences, especially religious differences. But Amsterdam grew mighty in part by admitting people of different faiths and backgrounds. Likewise, New Amsterdam. A mixed society and aggressive business environment became fused into New Amsterdam's identity, very much like the New York City we know today.

Essential Questions

Why did the Dutch build a trading town on Manhattan island? What did the Dutch need to physically build a working town on the island of Manhattan? How did that first company town influence the way New York City developed into the contemporary city we know today?

Vocabulary List

- Colony
- Fort
- Heritage
- Influence
- Map
- Property
- Symbol
- Trade
- Company town

BELOW:
Nova Amsteldam. ca.1670. 38.512

Introducing the Sources

In this lesson, newly digitized artifacts from the Museum of the City of New York's collection will help students discover who and what the Dutch found on Manhattan island when they arrived and what they built when they occupied the lower portion of the island.

***Novi Belgii Novaeque Angliae nec non partis Virginiae tabula multis in locis emendata.* 1623. 38.260.86**

– This map was created in the early stages of New Amsterdam's development.
– Long Island is near the center, along with Manhattan and Staten Island.
– The colony of New Netherland extended from north of present–day Albany, New York, south to the Delaware River, including all or parts of modern–day New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and Delaware. The English colonies of New England were to the north and Virginia to the south.
– The map includes depictions of natural resources such as tobacco, grains, beavers, and rabbits. It also includes people and a Native American village.

DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS

– What place does this map depict? Do you recognize the coastline and the islands?
– Can you find the location of New Amsterdam?
– What images did the mapmaker include on this map?
– What clues do these symbols give you about why the Dutch wanted a colony here?
– Why would a mapmaker choose to include animals on the map? Why are those animals important to the Dutch?
– Why would a mapmaker choose to include plants on the map? Why are those plants important to the Dutch?
– Why would a mapmaker choose to include people on the map?

Nova Amsteldam. ca. 1670. 38.512

- This image shows a view of
  New Amsterdam from south of the
  town in the water of New York Harbor.
- In the 17th century, long–distance
  transportation was by ship. Situating
  the capital of the colony on an island
  in New York Harbor made it accessible
  to the Atlantic Ocean.
- A fort, a windmill, a large house for the
  governor, and warehouses for trading
  are represented.

DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS

- What do you think the ships are for?
- Where do you think the people might be arriving from?
  Were they all Dutch?
- What kind of buildings do you see?
- Why would the Dutch West India Company choose
  this location to build their capital?

Activity

New Amsterdam was founded by the Dutch West India Company as a trading town, on a mostly forested island, far away from the Company's home city of Amsterdam on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. Imagine you are a member of that Company. How would you design the new town?

Based on the images and discussion, develop a list of what this new town will need to be successful in trade while providing for its residents. Ask students to think of basic needs, such as food, water, and shelter. The list may include the following:

– Houses
– Fort
– Windmill
– Docks for ships

– Shops
– Warehouses
– Farms
– Church

– School
– Wells for water

Compare the class's ideas to what they see in the images of New Amsterdam.

Contemporary Connections

How do we connect modern day New York City to its Dutch roots? Have students read Russell Shorto's account of how he became interested in New Amsterdam (or read out loud to younger students).

What inspired Russell Shorto to find out more about New Amsterdam?
– He spent time exploring an open space in his neighborhood, the churchyard of St Mark's in the Bowery, and found out that Petrus Stuyvesant, the last Director–General of New Netherland, is buried there.

Can you find any clues about New Amsterdam in your neighborhood?
– Many streets and neighborhoods around New York City are named for Dutch places or people. Brooklyn is named after the Dutch city of Breukelen; the Bronx was originally the home of Jonas Bronck and his family; and Staten Island was named for the Dutch governing body, the States General. Flushing, Flatbush, and Harlem are other examples of Dutch–derived place names.

What aspects of our Dutch heritage can we see in New York City today?
– Like New Amsterdam, New York is a city of immigrants. In 2013, 37% of New Yorkers were born in another country, including people from Latin America, Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa. [1]
– Half of all New Yorkers speak a language other than English at home, and an estimated 200 languages are spoken in New York City. [2]
– As in New Amsterdam, transporting goods in ships plays a big role in our city's economy. The Port of New York/New Jersey still ranks amongst the countries busiest.[3]

Endnotes

1 http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/about/pr121813a.shtml
2 http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/census/pop_facts.shtml
3 http://www.rita.dot.gov/bts/sites/rita.dot.gov.bts/files/publications/bts_fact_sheets/october_2010/html/entire.html