



# Life in New Amsterdam Educator Resource Guide



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Now all Men by these p<sup>r</sup>SENTS, that I Jacob Young  
of the City of New Yorke within the Jurisdiction of his Royall Highnesse in America gentl<sup>y</sup>  
greeting. KNOW Y<sup>e</sup>ll, that for, and in consideration of y<sup>e</sup> Summe of Sixteene hundred guineas w<sup>h</sup>am  
paid before the Ensealing & delivery hereof, by Aster Levy of y<sup>e</sup> said City Merchant, The Receipt w<sup>h</sup>ereof  
acknowledge; And doe exonerate, & him the said Aster Levy, his Heires, Executors, Administrato<sup>r</sup>s  
parcell thereof for Ever, by these p<sup>r</sup>SENTS, I have given, granted, bargained, sold, alienated, enfeoffed & con-  
firmed, doe give, grant, bargain, sell, alien, enfeoff, and confirme unto the aforesaided  
Executo<sup>r</sup>s & Administrato<sup>r</sup>s one parcell, or Sott of ground, and one Messuage or Tenement thereon,  
being with this said City, lately purchased by the said Jacob Young of Dirck Jan Sen van Oerend  
or Dirck Smith, Relacon being had unto the said condition of Sale, being hereunto annexed, bearing d<sup>e</sup>  
anno Domini 1675. appeareth; Together with all and singular the Appurtenances and Imp<sup>r</sup>o-  
vements thereunto in any Mann<sup>r</sup> of wisd<sup>e</sup> belongs or appertaines, to the sole and only proper use  
of y<sup>e</sup> said Aster Levy, his Heires, Executors, and Administrato<sup>r</sup>s, for Ever; To have, And to hold, or  
to Enjoy, free and cleere of, and from any Incumbent, Mortgage, Joynture, Execucion or Executions, or Inc<sup>r</sup>ed,  
or any other Act, or thing by me committed or done; Or any person or persons claiming, by, from, or w<sup>h</sup>o  
said Jacob Young doe by these p<sup>r</sup>SENTS, Covenant, promise, and with y<sup>e</sup> aforesaided Atte<sup>r</sup>  
Certs and Charges in the Law, any other or further Act or Acts, Thing or Things, Device or

## Noah Gelfand Religious Diversity in New Amsterdam





## Religious Diversity in New Amsterdam

New Amsterdam has long been remembered as a town with a religiously diverse population. In addition to members of the Reformed Dutch Church, Lutherans, Jews, French Reformed, Catholics, and Puritans all lived in or spent significant time in New Amsterdam. The presence of different religious groups in New Amsterdam did not mean that each enjoyed the same privileges and freedoms to practice their religions equally. For many colonists the ability to live and worship according to their conscience was a struggle — often unsuccessful.

The political structure of the colony shaped New Amsterdam's complex religious culture. The Dutch West India Company (WIC) ran the colony and defined permissible religious practices from above. In fact, when militant Calvinists chartered the WIC in the early 1620s, one of the Company's explicit responsibilities was to promote the Dutch Reformed religion. According to early WIC articles and regulations for New Netherland, the Reformed religion, as practiced in the Netherlands, was to be the only denomination permitted to worship publicly in the colony. Specifically, practice was to follow the Reformed Dutch version of Calvinism agreed upon at the Synod of Dordrecht in 1619. The Company's strictures about which version of Reformed Calvinism would be the official religion of its colony reflected the widely held belief that religious unity was essential to social harmony and to the orderly growth and development of a settlement.

The WIC helped establish the Reformed Dutch Church in the colony by paying the salaries of the first ministers beginning with Jonas Michaelius, who arrived in Manhattan in 1628. In later years, the financial support of ministers was shifted to the colonists themselves. Overall, five Reformed Dutch ministers served in New Amsterdam and a total of 11 ministers preached throughout New Netherland during the colony's existence. About 20% of colonists qualified for full membership within the Reformed Dutch Church, which required an intense spiritual examination, but many more attended Reformed services regularly.<sup>1</sup>

The WIC and the Reformed Dutch Church worked together to create a moral society based on biblical tenets. Prayers were publicly recited at the opening of court sessions in New Amsterdam, and days of fasting, prayer, and thanksgiving were set aside so colonists could repent their sins and avoid a potentially calamitous visitation of God's wrath. The WIC also instructed that the Sabbath was a day to rest and worship.<sup>2</sup>

While the Reformed Dutch Church was the official, state-sponsored religion in New Amsterdam, the Dutch Republic did not endorse religious coercion. In contrast to the subjects of other European states, all inhabitants had the right to believe what they wanted in the privacy of their own homes. This freedom of conscience for colonists had its origins in the 1579 political alliance that formed the United Provinces of the Netherlands, called the Union of Utrecht. Article 13 of the Union stated, "each person shall remain free in his religion, and that no one shall be persecuted or investigated because of their religion."<sup>3</sup> At a time when inquisitions interrogated settlers about their religious practices in Spanish America and Portuguese Brazil, Jews were expelled from Maryland, and Quakers hanged in Boston, the WIC's adherence to the principle of private religious liberty encouraged colonists with disparate religious views to migrate to New Amsterdam.

Nevertheless, in New Amsterdam, tensions emerged between the WIC's support of individual freedom of conscience and its prohibition against public worship by any other religious group than the Reformed Dutch. As groups of religious minorities established residence in New Amsterdam, they often desired to worship together in what could only be described as a very public manner. Reformed Dutch ministers called on WIC officials to suppress non-Reformed groups, creating strains that threatened to undermine the overall peace and order of the colony. Lutherans, who probably comprised the largest religious minority in New Amsterdam, Jews, who Stuyvesant attempted to bar from entering all together, and Quakers all petitioned the Company for the liberty to

PREVIOUS PAGE (TOP):

Deed between Asser Levy and Jacob Young. Sept. 5, 1677. 34.86.1

PREVIOUS PAGE (BOTTOM):

Alexander Alland. Boy reading a Torah scroll. ca. 1940. 94.104.567

Courtesy and © Alexander Alland, Jr.

## ABOUT

### Noah L. Gelfand

I first became interested in history as a young child living in Pennsylvania. My family often took trips into Philadelphia where I got to see iconic symbols of American history, such as the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall, firsthand. I have particularly vivid memories of the United States Bicentennial celebration there in 1976. I was pretty much hooked on history after that, but it was in high school in Connecticut learning from an incredibly energetic “Teacher of the Year,” Gordon Williams, that I began to think about history more seriously and decided to major in it in college. Years later in graduate school I had the good fortune to be able to study with Karen O. Kupperman, whose transatlantic approach to studying the early modern era helped shape my understanding of New Amsterdam and colonial New York City. This approach, which I have employed in this piece for the Museum of the City of New York, helps to place New Amsterdam’s history within a wider context of an interconnected and dynamic 17th-century Atlantic world.

*Noah L. Gelfand currently teaches history at the University of Connecticut at Stamford and at Hunter College. He earned his Ph.D. in history from New York University, where he received numerous awards, including a Quinn Foundation fellowship from the McNeil Center for Early American Studies and a Touro National Heritage Trust fellowship from the John Carter Brown Library. He has published essays and articles and is currently working on a book about Jewish mercantile communities in the early modern Atlantic world.*

worship publicly in the colony. Each request was denied, but all were reminded that they were allowed to practice their religions quietly in their own houses. Moreover, Company officials in Amsterdam tried to convince their employee in New Amsterdam, Director-General Petrus Stuyvesant — a man who took very seriously his sworn oath “not to admit any other than the true reformed faith” — to be a little friendlier to religious minorities so long as they did not undermine the Reformed Church or Company’s authority.<sup>4</sup> Overall, the directors of the WIC tried to navigate a delicate course. They had pledged to defend the interests of the Reformed Church, but they also did not want to completely alienate populations that were potentially important to the growth of their colony.

It is important to understand that present-day ideas about the desirability of diversity or current meanings of toleration are not applicable to 17th-century New Amsterdam. The Dutch respected everyone’s right to their private beliefs so long as they did not disturb the public peace. This protection, which was unavailable in much of the rest of the Atlantic world of the era, did result in a number of religious minorities settling in New Amsterdam. But, only adherents of the Reformed Dutch Church could take communion from, be baptized by, or listen to a sermon from an ordained minister in a public church. It would not be until after the American Revolution that all religious denominations were guaranteed this right to public worship.



Wedding pillow cover. 17th Century.  
34.470.12

## Biography of Asser Levy

### Endnotes

- 1 Jaap Jacobs, *The Colony of New Netherland: A Dutch Settlement in Seventeenth-Century America*, 155–160. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009
- 2 Firth Haring Fabend, *New Netherland in a Nutshell: A Concise History of the Dutch Colony in North America*, 84–87. Albany: New Netherland Institute, 2012.
- 3 Herbert H. Rowen, translator, *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times: A Documentary History*, 69–74. New York: Harper & Row, 1972.
- 4 Jacobs, *The Colony of New Netherland*, 162–163.
- 5 Leo Herszkowitz, “By Chance or Choice: Jews in New Amsterdam, 1654” *de Halve Maen* 77 (2004): 23.
- 6 Extract from “Reply by the Amsterdam Chamber of the West India Company to Stuyvesant’s letter, April 26, 1655,” in *Documentary History of the Jews in the United States, 1654–1875*, ed. Morris U. Schappes, 4–5. New York: The Citadel Press, 1950.

Asser Levy was one of the first Jewish settlers in New Amsterdam and the only Jewish colonist to remain in the colony through the English conquest and establishment of New York. An Ashkenazi Jew, Levy was born in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth town of Vilnius before living for a time in Schwelm, Westphalia. As a young man he moved to Amsterdam, then an important center for Judaism in Western Europe and an increasingly popular destination for Jews from Eastern Europe. In the summer of 1654, Levy left Amsterdam aboard the *Peereboom* to pursue opportunities in Dutch North America. He arrived in New Amsterdam on August 22nd.<sup>5</sup>

Twenty-three Sephardic Jewish refugees from the recently surrendered Dutch West India Company (WIC) colony in Pernambuco, Brazil landed in New Amsterdam a few weeks after Levy. Famously, Director-General Petrus Stuyvesant, mixing anti-Semitic views along with concerns that these impoverished Jews would become a financial burden on the colony, asked them to depart New Amsterdam. As a man with some means, Asser Levy was not included in Stuyvesant’s request. While the WIC eventually ruled that all Jews had liberty to “travel and trade to and in New Netherland and live and remain there,” most of the Brazilian refugees dispersed from the colony.<sup>6</sup> Asser Levy stayed and was joined, if only temporarily, by other Jews from Amsterdam. These Jews petitioned the Company for the privilege to pray publicly in a synagogue, but in keeping with a WIC policy that prohibited public worship by all except Reformed Dutch adherents, were permitted only the right to worship privately in their homes.

Surviving sources highlight Asser Levy’s commitment to living as a Jew in New Amsterdam. He traveled back to Amsterdam in 1660, where the prospects of finding a Jewish woman to marry were infinitely greater than in New Amsterdam, and married Miriam Israel before returning to New Amsterdam. As a butcher in New Amsterdam he was excused from slaughtering hogs and a later inventory of his estate reveals that Asser Levy possessed two of each type of cooking implement and a large number of plates, which strongly suggests that he and Miriam kept a kosher home.

To help facilitate his economic activities in New Amsterdam he received the burgher right in 1657 and for similar purposes was made a denizen of New York City after the English takeover. Asser Levy’s entrepreneurial career in Manhattan stands out for the sheer diversity of his business activities. In addition to co-owning a slaughterhouse, Levy was involved in a variety of mercantile activities trading bulk products such as grains, flour, tobacco, and salt, as well an array of finished European products, including linens, clothing, hats, jewelry, and silver containers. His customers lived throughout the colony, from Albany and Esopus to Long Island and New York City. Levy also bought and sold real estate on Manhattan island. Asser Levy died in New York in February 1682. Miriam followed in 1688. The couple apparently had no surviving children.



## Religious Diversity in New Amsterdam

# LESSON 5

## Introducing the Topic

New Amsterdam was home to people of many different religious faiths, including Lutherans, Jews, Catholics, Puritans, Quakers, and members of the French Reformed Church. However, the Dutch Reformed Church was the official religion of the colony and the early settlers were instructed that only members of the Dutch Reform Church could practice their religion in public. In fact, Petrus Stuyvesant, the Director-General (1647-1664), fined, arrested, and attempted to banish Quakers and other groups. When the Dutch West India Company was chartered, one of its explicit responsibilities was to promote the Reformed Dutch religion as it was practiced in the Netherlands. In the 17th century, it was commonly believed that society would only run smoothly if everyone held the same religious beliefs. However, they also followed the rule set down in the Treaty of Utrecht that no one should be persecuted for their beliefs. They would accept people of any religion in their colony, as long as they practiced their faith quietly, in private.

### Essential Questions

How did people of different religions express their faith in New Amsterdam? How did members of religious minorities flourish in New Amsterdam? What were the attitudes of 17th century New Amsterdam towards religious diversity and toleration?

### Vocabulary List

- |           |              |             |
|-----------|--------------|-------------|
| - Belief  | - Kosher     | - Tolerance |
| - Burgher | - Mercantile | - Treaty    |
| - Charter | - Motif      |             |
| - Denizen | - Religion   |             |

## Introducing the Sources

### Wedding pillow cover. 17th Century. 34.470.12

- This pillow cover was made to celebrate a wedding and has a hand embroidered design on the net.
- Symbols on the pillow include a crown, birds, and angels. Images of angels are used as symbols by many different religious denominations, and weddings are very important religious ceremonies in many cultures.

In this lesson, newly digitized artifacts from the Museum of the City of New York's collection will help students learn about religious diversity in New Amsterdam and about its influence on New York City.



### OBJECT BASED QUESTIONS

- What is this artifact? Look for clues in the shape and the material.
- Consider the work involved in creating this object. How much time and effort do you think it would take? What does that tell you about its importance?
- What motifs can you find on it?
- Why do you think someone would choose to embroider angels on a pillow cover for a wedding?

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

- The image of New Amsterdam on this map includes a key to some of the important buildings and is written in Dutch. Several of the most important places are labeled with letters.
- The fort is labeled with a letter "A," which is hard to find in the image. It is written on the wall of the fort, near the corner. Find it by locating the flagpole (D) and following it down to the wall below. The letter "A" is on the wall, just to the right.
- "de Kerck" means "the church" in Dutch. It is marked in the image with a letter "B." The Dutch Reformed Church was built inside the fort. The fort was also the headquarters of the Dutch West India Company in New Amsterdam. It was where the Director-General met with his council, where Company records were stored, and also where the people of New Amsterdam would go in times of danger.



**DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS**

- What clues in this image inform the viewer about the types of buildings depicted?
- Have students locate the Dutch Reformed Church. What do you notice about the church's location? What does the location suggest to you?

**The Castello Plan. 1916. 29.100.709**

- This image shows a map of New Amsterdam in 1660. This copy was created in 1916. Keep in mind that this plan, like many made in the 17th century, is oriented differently from maps made today. West is on the top, north is to the right, east is on the bottom, and south is to the left.



**DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS**

- Where is the fort, which is also the site for the Reformed Dutch Church?
- Where did people of other faiths practice their religions?
- Which buildings do you think might be homes?

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**Deed between Asser Levy and Jacob Young. September 5, 1677. 34.86.1**

- This document records Asser Levy's purchase of property belonging to Jacob Young. Asser Levy was one of the first Jewish people to come to New Amsterdam, and here his occupation is listed as a merchant.
- The seal at the bottom is a clue that this deed, or record of the sale and ownership of land, is an official document.
- It is written in English, which is a clue that it was created after the English took control of New Amsterdam in 1664.



**DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS**

- What clues in this document help the viewer understand what type of document it is?
- Have students read the first few lines of the deed, from the original if possible, or from the excerpt transcribed below (or read it out loud to younger students).  
*Know all men by these presents, that I Jacob Young late of the City of New York...send greeting. Know ye, that for...the sum of sixteen hundred guilders wampum, to me...paid before the ensealing and delivery hereof, by Asser Levy of the said city merchant...have given, granted, bargained, sold...and confirmed...unto the aforementioned Asser Levy...one parcel, or lot of ground, and one messuage or tenement thereon...lying and being within this said city...*
- Who is involved in this transaction? What are their roles?
- How did Asser Levy pay for this land?
- What does this deed tell us about Asser Levy's life in New Amsterdam?

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**Further Reading:  
Asser Levy**

Have students read Noah Gelfand's biography of Asser Levy (or read it out loud to younger students). How does his story relate to the images and artifacts we've seen?

- Asser Levy would not have attended the Reformed Dutch Church located within the fort, but he most likely practiced his religion privately at home.
- Asser Levy would have done official business within the fort. He and other Jews in the city petitioned for the privilege to pray publicly in a synagogue. This privilege was denied, but the Dutch tradition of tolerating diversity allowed them to continue practicing privately without interference.
- Asser Levy also asked for and received the "burgher right," a kind of citizenship, in 1657. At first, it was not granted because of his religion, but when he showed a document proving that he already had this right in the Company's home town of Amsterdam, he was allowed to receive it here.
- In 1660 he traveled back to Amsterdam and married a woman named Miriam Israel. When they returned to New Amsterdam, they might have used objects in their home to help them celebrate their faith, as we saw with the pillow cover made to celebrate a wedding.



- From an inventory or list of Asser Levy’s belongings made when he died, we see that he and Miriam kept two sets of cooking implements and many dishes, which suggests that they followed Jewish religious rules for keeping a kosher house.
- In addition to buying and selling land, Asser Levy’s business activities included owning a slaughterhouse, trading colonial products such as grains, flour, tobacco, and salt, as well as finished European goods, such as linens, clothing, hats, jewelry, and silver containers.
- What does Asser Levy’s success tell us about religious diversity and toleration in New Amsterdam? He became a highly successful and wealthy merchant, and his success and commitment to New Amsterdam encouraged him to remain through the English takeover, helping to carry the Dutch tradition of tolerance into early New York.

## Activity

### The Flushing Remonstrance

Download the Remonstrance of the Inhabitants of the Town of Flushing to Governor Stuyvesant, December 27, 1657. <http://www.nyym.org/flushing/remons.html>

Known today as the Flushing Remonstrance, this petition is one of New York State’s most cherished documents, and is considered a landmark of New York’s heritage of civil and religious rights. It was signed by 31 men in response to the governor’s actions against Quakers. It had no immediate impact at the time, however — beyond getting four of its signers jailed.

- Who is the petition written to? Who is the petition from?
- What are the two perspectives laid out in the first paragraph?
- The last paragraph states, “Therefore if any of these said persons come in love unto us...” Who are the different groups mentioned in the petition? What does that tell us about the make-up of the inhabitants of New Amsterdam?
- How is petitioning a form of activism and why do you think it is still referenced and revered over 350 years later?

## Contemporary Connections

The Dutch did not believe in religious coercion. That means everyone had the right to practice their religion in the privacy of their own homes. In fact, the Union of Utrecht, the founding document of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, stated that “each person shall remain free in his religion, and that no one shall be persecuted or investigated because of their religion.”

For students who have studied the Constitution, ask if this reminds them of anything found in our governing laws today. Compare and contrast with the First Amendment.

### How do we connect modern-day New York City to its Dutch roots?

Have students read Noah L. Gelfand’s account of how he became interested in New Amsterdam (or read out loud to younger students).

### How did he become interested in history?

- Noah Gelfand grew up in Pennsylvania. He often went on trips with his family to Philadelphia, where he saw iconic symbols from American history, including objects such as the Liberty Bell and places such as Liberty Hall.

**Have you ever gone on a trip that made you excited to learn about the past?**

**Where did you go?**