

Governors Island Lifeblood of American Liberty

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In order *"to gain a deeper understanding of U.S. history"* all applicants for U.S. citizenship are required to take a civics test. One question is: *"Why did the Pilgrims come to America?"* The required answer is: *"To gain religious freedom."*⁽¹⁾ Then, is this answer an example of reprehensible bureaucratic ignorance of U.S. history or is it a conscious falsification of history in order to reinforce a propagandistic myth?

In 1608 the Pilgrims lived in Leiden, Holland, prior to their haphazard departure to America in 1620. The Dutch Republic was a magnet for religious diversity where the legal-cultural tradition of toleration—as promulgated in the Republic's 1579 founding document—provided a unique measure of enlightened living conditions for all, including the Pilgrims, to worship as they saw fit. Their belief was rooted in the Geneva Bible thus sharing their convictions with many like-minded inhabitants of that city. In 1622, sixty-seven percent of Leiden's population had come from outside the Dutch Republic in search of religious tolerance.⁽²⁾ There, they found a haven from intolerant or despotic regimes. Because the city was a kaleidoscope of religious variety, the Pilgrims were fully embraced.

How, then, could the Pilgrims' motivation have been to sail, via England, for America in search of religious freedom? There was no legal-cultural tradition of religious tolerance in America which afforded them protection from religious intolerance. Or were they the God-chosen ones who would bestow such protection on assorted newcomers thus divinely delivering religious diversity for all in New England?

The primary answer to that U.S. history question, therefore, doesn't lie in the Pilgrims' religious conviction as Separatists from the Church of England or in issues of religious liberty in Holland or, for that matter, in impious America. To the contrary, religious plurality was viewed by the Pilgrims as anathema to their orthodox belief and made separation from any authority, whether civil or religious, desirable. By insulating themselves from the forces of tolerance they sought to evade the impending corrupting influences of a pluralist society on their self-imposed, restrictive lifestyle and to avoid assimilation in Dutch society.

More importantly however, given the geo-political conditions during the Twelve-Year Truce between Spain and the Dutch Republic (1609-1621), the Pilgrims' hidden motivation must have been to circumvent looming civil war among various religious-political factions who were at each others throats during the armistice. By 1619, orthodox Calvinist Protestants had been successful at seizing political power and were ready to resume war with Spain in 1621 in an attempt to remove Spain's authority over the southern Netherlands. Alarmed by the reality of imminent war with Spain wherein the Dutch Republic would have to face Spain's overpowering economic and military might, the Pilgrims decided to flee. That they asked God's help to do so is understandable. However, their arrival in America was certainly not the panacea of religious freedom as the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service would want new citizens to believe.

We, therefore, need to revisit the development and meaning of religious freedom in modern-day American liberty and look elsewhere in American cultural history for the origins of religious toleration and liberty as the basis for religious and ethnic diversity. With certainty, neither a legal-political condition of toleration nor religious plurality as an enduring cultural tradition was delivered with the first settlers at fictitious Plymouth Rock in New England in 1620, or at the founding of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. In fact, these notions started on Noten Eylant, now Governors Island in New York harbor, at the founding of the province of New Netherland, now the New York Tri-State region, in 1624.

Historical facts prove definitively that above 41 degrees latitude the concept of religious freedom in any form didn't exist. Below 38 degrees latitude, at Jamestown, Virginia, the precept of religious tolerance was also absent as church and state were intertwined. The historian R. R. Howison stated in his "*Settlement of Virginia*", that the first charter to the

Jamestown settlers in 1607 “embraces the most destructive elements of despotism and dissension...” and that “the Church of England was at once established.” The leading objective of the preamble to the charter of King James to the Colony of Virginia was to disseminate Christianity among “such people as yet live in darkness and miserable ignorance of the true knowledge and worship of God and might in time be brought to human civility and to a settled and quiet government.” The charter called for using every means possible to bring the natives to “the knowledge of God and the obedience of the King, his heirs and successors, under such severe pains and punishments as should be inflicted by the respective presidents and councils of the several colonies.”⁽³⁾

Such a statement would prove to be unthinkable when the first settlers from the Netherlands landed on Governors Island. Their arrival was a vital turning point for North America because they took with them most specific directives which would have a lasting, meaningful influence on their new community and for generations to come. The settlers had received instructions which incorporated the laws and ordinances of the states of Holland.⁽⁴⁾ It meant the end of the law of the ship in the territory of New Netherland and the beginning of the Republic’s only overseas province ever.

The Governors Island settlement completed the Dutch Republic’s claim on the territory and transformed it from a place for private, commercial activities under patents from the States General to a North American province of the Dutch Republic under the auspices of the Dutch West India Company: (1) Discovery in 1609; (2) Surveying and Charting from 1611-1614; and (3) taking Possession through Settlement. Some of the Governors Island settlers were geographically dispersed to the Delaware River, the Connecticut River and at the top of the Hudson River (now Albany) in order to legally delineate the claim to the Province of New Netherland according to the Law of Nations. The Governors Island settlement constituted the best-planned first landing ever by any nation on the North-American continent.

The island embodies a message of historic substance to America and carries great symbolic meaning because of the settlers’ first instructions that only “through attitude and by example” could they attract the natives and non-believers to God’s word “without, on the other hand, to persecute someone by reason of his religion and to leave everyone the freedom of his conscience.”⁽⁵⁾ That instruction, in turn, was based on the 1579 Union of Utrecht—the treaty that united the Netherlands’s northern provinces, previously under Spanish authority—which stated that “everyone shall remain free in religion and that no one may be persecuted or investigated because of religion.”⁽⁶⁾

The meaning of those first instructions for New York’s inheritance to the nation can better be understood when knowing that, in the 1630’s, a Manhattan farm was owned by a Moroccan Muslim. Visiting Father Isaac Jogues reported that in 1643 more than 18 languages were spoken and that beside Calvinists there were “Catholics, English Puritans, Lutherans, Anabaptists, etc.”⁽⁷⁾ But does that prove the efficacy of a legal-cultural

extrapolation from *patria* onto the North-American continent or was, perhaps, non-Christian, ethnic diversity a historical accident?

Examining and understanding the role of the Jewish nation in the Dutch Republic could possibly help shed some more light on how the Dutch Republic can be viewed as New York's true birthfather. This birthfather was Leo Belgicus or Netherlands Lion. It was his DNA and precepts, implanted on Governors Island in the year 1624, that were the building blocks of America's earliest childhood. He was also responsible for the traits that subsequently helped shape America's flourishing, compatible personality of liberty and freedom.



New York's Birthfather

Namely, after 13 years of war, in 1581, the seven northern states of the Netherlands declared independence from Spanish sovereignty based on the Right-of-Man doctrine. It stated that when a "ruler of the people (King Philip II of Spain) does not behave thus, but on the contrary oppresses them...they may not only disallow his authority, but legally proceed to the choice of another ruler for their defense."⁽⁸⁾

This fundamental precept of freedom and liberty was to become the crucial underpinning of the American Republic in 1776. The adoption of the Right-of-Man doctrine formed the basis for the statement that "the United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States.". It declared that "whenever any form of government (the English Crown) becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it and to institute new government."⁽⁹⁾ This doctrine stands central to the development of constitutional and republican government and forms a momentous

historical link between the founding elements of the two republics as unambiguously acknowledged by John Adams in 1781 when he wrote that *“the originals of the two republics are so much alike that the history of one seems but a transcript from that of the other; ...the great characters the Dutch Republic exhibits...have been particularly studied, admired, and imitated in every American state.”*⁽¹⁰⁾

The planting of the Dutch Republic’s legal-cultural code with the first settlers on Governors Island lie at the root of the New York Tri-State traditions and, ultimately, successful American pluralism (diversity) and liberty through the active notion of tolerance. The proof of its importance to American culture lies in the fact that it became finally philosophically justified and constitutionally articulated in 1791. Therefore, Leo Belgicus, New York’s historical birthfather, exemplifies religious and ethnic tolerance as well as the historic doctrine of the right of a people to throw off a tyrant and establish government by its own authority. He bridges time and distance and tells us that in a nation with liberty-for-all, tolerance is its lifeblood—that tolerance and liberty are interdependent and inseparable in a truly free, pluralistic society.



By just glancing at the companion etching of New Amsterdam of 1650, you will walk away with the fleeting impression that the picture is devoid of humanity. You will likely underestimate the number of persons etched on it. However, careful perusal and thoughtful attention allow you to discern the bustle of 72 persons etched in this serene townscape. Similarly, by just glancing at New Netherland’s 60 year history (1614-1674), one is likely to make too little of the precedents etched in especially New Amsterdam and may underestimate their significance on America after 300-plus years. But in the way that an adult’s character bears the genetic and learned traits of one’s childhood, modern-day American pluralism carries these traits of seventeenth-century New Netherland.

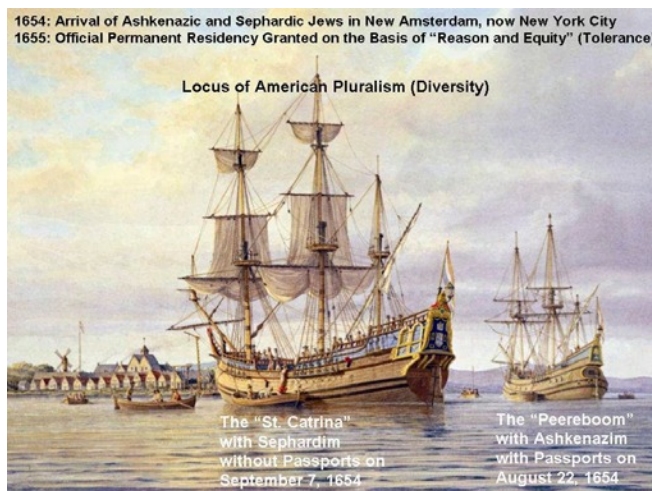
In spite of the disappearance of New Netherland’s visual culture and the ongoing irreverent destruction of most of its textual testimony—with the remaining records for the most part, scattered, locked up, not translated and politically neglected—the province’s thematic meaning to American culture surpasses the extant material cultures or national historical significance of the remaining individual colonies of the Original Thirteen. Scrutinizing contemporary cartographic works of that period point to intense knowledge of and deep interest in the ideals and success of the province, both from within the province and in *patria*, and imparts the concealed cultural impact New Netherland had on America’s heritage. Even though early American history continues

to be viewed habitually through mythical Anglo-centric glasses, New Netherland's contribution to America can't be easily dismissed or viewed as an unwarranted conceptual leap by earnest historians.

Conceivably, then, we can use the 350th anniversary, in 2005, of continuous non-Christian residency in North America to illustrate and understand how the forces of religious tolerance arrived in North America by drawing attention to an event of crucial significance to the development of fundamental American values, whose consequences—the achievements, hopes and expectations it helped engender, as well as the frustrations—continue to reverberate to this day.

In September 1654, Petrus Stuyvesant, director-general of New Netherland, attempted to deny a sizable contingent of Sephardim, Jews of Iberian or North African origin, permanent residency in New Amsterdam. He had not objected to the earlier arrival, in August 1654, of a few Ashkenazim, High German or East European Jews, traveling with Dutch West India Company passports from Amsterdam via London on the *Peereboom* (*Pear tree*). The large Sephardic group, however, sailing without passports on the Dutch vessel *Sint Catrina* from South America via the Caribbean, was made to feel decidedly unwelcome.⁽¹⁾

Stuyvesant, certainly intolerant by today's standards, was a pillar of the Dutch Reformed Church who viewed religious heterodoxy as a potentially divisive factor that would militate against the organic unity of New Netherland. However, as the West India Company's agent, he was answerable to a higher authority. Stuyvesant's personal idealistic ecclesiastical vision for the province clashed with the secular commercial interests of the Company's directors in Amsterdam, as well as with the more enlightened cultural and legal traditions of the mother country and, particularly, the city of Amsterdam.



It was a general rule in the Dutch Republic that whenever or wherever in the world the interests of state and church, or of commercial and ecclesiastical power, came into

conflict, it was the secular authority that ultimately prevailed—and this certainly held true for both the West India and East India Companies. Hence, in all matters of religious intolerance, Stuyvesant was overruled by his superiors, who in 1655 granted the Sephardic merchants residency on the basis of “*reason and equity*,”⁽¹²⁾ thereby continuing a tradition of cultural pluralism in the colony. This, and the fundamental, natural right to toleration as written in the 1579 founding document, was affirmed by treaty for New Netherlanders exclusively when English rule was imposed on them in 1664, and later reintroduced as legal-political code in the First Amendment to the American Constitution.

Yet, intermittently for more than three centuries, cultural and legal intolerance, and overt prejudice towards minorities, would continue to occur in New York. Roman Catholicism, for example, was outlawed from 1691 to 1783. From the arrival of the first Jews in New York to the inauguration of Abe Beame in 1974—320 years later—as the city’s first Jewish mayor (*pace* Mayor Fiorello La Guardia’s Jewish mother), lie some profoundly important lessons for humanity. Placing that crucial event of 1655 into its broader global context, and including it in America’s collective memory, will lead to a better understanding of its historical significance and help sort the facts from the myths surrounding this issue.

The Republic’s founding document was to prove a potent enticement for those seeking sanctuary from religious intolerance during the turbulent years of the Reformation. Two years later, in 1581, when the port of Lisbon was closed to Dutch merchants, the States General of the Dutch Republic issued the first permit (*sauvegard*) for Portuguese-Jewish merchants to trade freely by way of Dutch ports, giving them the same privileges as Dutch merchants. Not only poor migrants, but also large-scale merchants trading in sugar, Brazil wood, ginger, cotton, diamonds and pearls, they took advantage of the freedom to practice their Jewish faith again in their newly adopted country.



The spiritual founder of the West India Company, Willem Usselinx, himself a migrant from Antwerp, declared in 1645 that “*it is because of foreigners that the country will be peopled, because its might is derived mostly from those who come from abroad and settle, marry and multiply here. If one were to remove the foreigners, their children and grandchildren, from the large cities of Holland, the remaining residents would be fewer in number than those departed.*”⁽¹³⁾ The attitude reflected in his statement provided the basis for the cultural toleration that

encouraged ethnic diversity in the Dutch Republic. It also served as a magnet for foreign capital seeking new investment opportunities, thereby stimulating international trade and nourishing the Republic’s Golden Age.

In 1624, this enlightened tradition of cultural pluralism and commerce accompanied the first settlers to Governors Island, then called Noten Eylant (Nut Island). Their settlement was established on the basis of secular concerns. Yet, as noted previously, they were under specific instructions not to discriminate against anyone for one's religious belief and were to grant everyone the liberty of one's conscience. Nevertheless, they were also instructed to try attracting natives and non-believers to God's word but then only "*through attitude and by example.*" May not, then, Governors Island safely be designated as the point of origin in what was to become the United States of America, if not in the entire Western Hemisphere, of the tradition of cultural tolerance?

Cultural diversity as a legal imperative, rather than as something contingent on the shifting views, prejudices or self-interest of an individual on the basis of fleeting authority obtained by appointment to office, was thus planted on the North American continent in 1624. Upon the provisional transfer to England of New Netherland on August 27, 1664, Petrus Stuyvesant and his council ensured that, under the provisions of Article VIII of the Articles of Transfer they negotiated, New Netherlanders under future English jurisdiction "*shall keep and enjoy the liberty of their consciences in religion.*"⁽¹⁴⁾

Yet, ten years before the imposition of English authority, Stuyvesant, the seventh and last West India Company director for New Netherland, had attempted to prevent the sizable contingent of Sephardic refugees from settling in the province on the pretext of religion. What accounts for his and his council's apparent change of heart in 1664? Did Stuyvesant's earlier attempt to impose his personal views on a pluralist community have its basis in commercial self-interest? Or was it an effort to strengthen his authority, and that of the Reformed Church Council of which he was a member, over a culturally diverse population at the expense of the Dutch motto of "Concordia"; or both? (The latter word, meaning "Harmony in Difference" or "Unity," is still incorporated in the municipal seal of the borough of Brooklyn.)

After all, at a time when Jews were banned from Portugal, Spain, France and England, the toleration of both Sephardim and Ashkenazim in Amsterdam was already legendary. The right to openly practice their faith in the Dutch Republic proved a compelling inducement to immigration: the first Sephardic community, Beth Jacob, was founded at The Hague in 1602. But freedom to practice their religion was not the sole consideration determining their relocation to various mercantile towns of the Dutch Republic.

Why was it that the well respected, commercially successful Amsterdam community of Portuguese Israelites enjoyed such an excellent relationship with Holland's Lord-Lieutenants Maurice and Frederick Henry, half brothers and noblemen of the House of Orange-Nassau? They were the sons of William I of Nassau, Prince of Orange and founding father of the Dutch Republic. In 1642, Frederick Henry and his son William, the future Prince Willem II, made an official visit to Amsterdam's Sephardic synagogue,

Talmud Torah. Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel presented them with a 2000 florin gift on behalf of the congregation and gave a speech in which he said; “We no longer consider Spain and Portugal our fatherland but Holland; we no longer honor the Spanish or Portuguese king but the states of Holland and you as our authorities, whose blessed arms protect and sword defend us...knowing that our prosperity depends on you.”⁽¹⁵⁾



Such protection must truly have been special, given the Jewish immigrants’ relatively short incubation as a new community in a strange land where they would continue to speak the language of the Republic’s Iberian archenemy for over 200 years. Later, in 1655, the same Ben Israel, not only a rabbi but a printer, in a pamphlet titled *Humble Address* would begin his discussion of the admission of Jews to England at the “invitation” of Oliver Cromwell in London with the words “*How Profitable the Nation of the Iewes are.*” In it, Ben Israel writes that the Jews received “great Charity and Benevolency” in Amsterdam, where there were no less than 400 families who “enjoy a good part of the West and East-Indian Compagnies” in “no lesse then three hundred houses of their own.”⁽¹⁶⁾ Only in 1664 did the English Crown, in the person of Charles II, extend the Jewish community in England a formal promise of protection, followed in 1673, after a period of persecution, by a guarantee of freedom of worship.⁽¹⁷⁾

Also in 1642, the new and less important Ashkenazic community in Amsterdam bought land for its own cemetery. But more significantly, across the ocean, Johan Maurits of Nassau, the Governor-General of Dutch Brazil, opened the first, Sephardic, synagogue in the Western Hemisphere in Pernambuco at Recife. A year earlier, Chacham Isaac Aboab da Fonseca, a member of the Amsterdam rabbinate, had sailed for Dutch Brazil to become the first rabbi in the Americas at Recife.⁽¹⁸⁾

Brazil had been a destination of Dutch merchantmen since the 1580s and Dutch merchants already controlled over 50 percent of the Brazilian sugar trade by the end of the Twelve-Year Truce between the Republic and Spain (1609-1621). At the time, sugar was a more important commodity than even pepper. The high value of sugar and the enormous profits that could be made can best be indicated by the fact that, in 1618, the wholesale value of four shiploads of sugar was equal to that of 200 ships carrying salt. Given the higher profit margins on sugar, just one shipload of sugar was more profitable than fifty of salt!⁽¹⁹⁾

The migration of Portuguese Jewish merchants to the Republic from 1580 onwards meant that sugar, traded mainly by them, became the focus of the West India Company’s activities when it was founded in 1621. The refining of sugar in Spain and Portugal had been forbidden since 1581 so that the low-cost, high-value-added activity of refining would stimulate internal economic growth in Brazil. In 1620, construction of

Amsterdam's first public synagogue had begun and, in 1622, the Portuguese Israelites explained their importance to the Republic by pointing out that during the armistice between 1609 and 1621 they had built about 10 to 15 ships yearly and were able, at the expense of the Portuguese caravels that had previously dominated the transport of the commodity, to attract between a half and two-thirds of the lucrative sugar trade.⁽²⁰⁾ Their business caused the number of sugar refineries in Amsterdam to increase from three to 25 in 25 years.

Portuguese Jewish merchants thus contributed to the emergence of the Dutch Golden Age, as the trade in high-value-added colonial products, controlled primarily by Israelite merchants and, in Asia, by the East India Company, was a substantial reason for the republic's prosperity. The West India Company's "groot desseyn" (grand design) was, by taking Brazil, to seize the source of its enemy's wealth. Its first attempt, in 1624, to attack Bahia with 26 ships and 3,300 men failed, but its assault in 1630 on Recife and Olinda in Pernambuco, with 67 ships and over 7,000 men, succeeded, forming the bridgehead for control of more than half of Brazil. The return of Dutch Brazil to the Portuguese in 1654 was the reason that some of the Brazilian "Portuguese Israelite" merchants sought residency in New Netherland.⁽²¹⁾



Stuyvesant was highly regarded because of his administrative and military capabilities. Before being appointed Director-General in New Netherland, he had served in Dutch Brazil and had been promoted from Commissary of Stores to Governor of Curacao [a Caribbean island which still has a splendid synagogue from 1732, a copy of the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam and the oldest functioning Jewish house of worship in the New World⁽²²⁾].

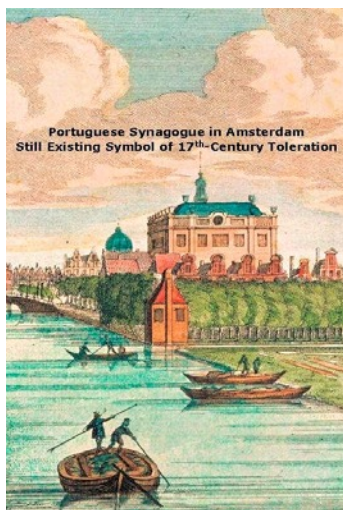
As the son of an orthodox Reformed minister, he had studied at the Calvinist University of Franeker. A lettered man and a dogmatic member of New Amsterdam's Reformed Church Council, he must have been familiar with *The History of the Jews* and *The Brazilian Money Sack*, two well-known pamphlets of the period dealing with the supposed perfidy of the Jews. *The History of the Jews*, written by Abraham Costerus, a fundamentalist Calvinist preacher from Antwerp, and published in Amsterdam in 1609, warned Amsterdam's merchants of the deceit of the Jews desiring a public synagogue from which they could spew their corrupting influence upon Christians. *The Brazilian Money Sack*, purportedly printed in Recife in 1647, was an anonymous pamphlet describing alleged complicity between representatives of the West India Company and the Portuguese Israelite merchants.

In spite of the magnetism that the Jewish nation exercised on many biblically oriented Dutchmen, some Calvinist zealots viewed the Jewish nation as blasphemous and a threat to the "true religion," and, perhaps more worrisomely for them, as an

exclusionary force in competition with Christian trade. These two themes were used by both Stuyvesant and the doctrinally rigid New Amsterdam dominie Johannes Megapolensis in their attempt to deny the Jews sailing from Brazil residency in New Netherland.

As the “established” or “official” religion, the Dutch Reformed Church played a great role in the affairs of the state and was influential in political matters. Its fanatical wing even favored a theocracy. However, the Dutch Reformed Church was not a state church, and when the Sephardim exercised their right to petition the government for redress of their grievances (now enshrined in the First Amendment), civil power prevailed and dominie Megapolensis and Stuyvesant were forced to retreat. In all attempts at religious partiality or intolerance, Stuyvesant was overruled by his superiors. After all, prior to his arrival in 1647, toleration had already been established as the basis for religious and ethnic pluralism and as an implicit cultural and legal tradition in New Netherland since 1624. It also served as the West India Company’s policy in the management of its possessions in the Western Hemisphere, which specifically provided that *“Catholics or Jews must be left free without interference or investigation in their consciences or homes.”*⁽²³⁾

Ironically, at the same time that Stuyvesant sought to exclude the Dutch-Brazilian Jewish refugees from permanent residency in New Amsterdam and Menasseh ben Israel visited Cromwell in London to plead for the admission of Jews to England, a member of the Portuguese Israelites in Amsterdam was excommunicated and banned from the people of Israel as a heretic by the parnassim (Jewish religious leaders). The ban, the Cheirem, was pronounced against the Amsterdam-born philosopher Baruch de Spinoza who had questioned the Torah as divine revelation. This ban had never before been decreed on the basis of heretical ideas and is still seen as an example of rabbinic intolerance.

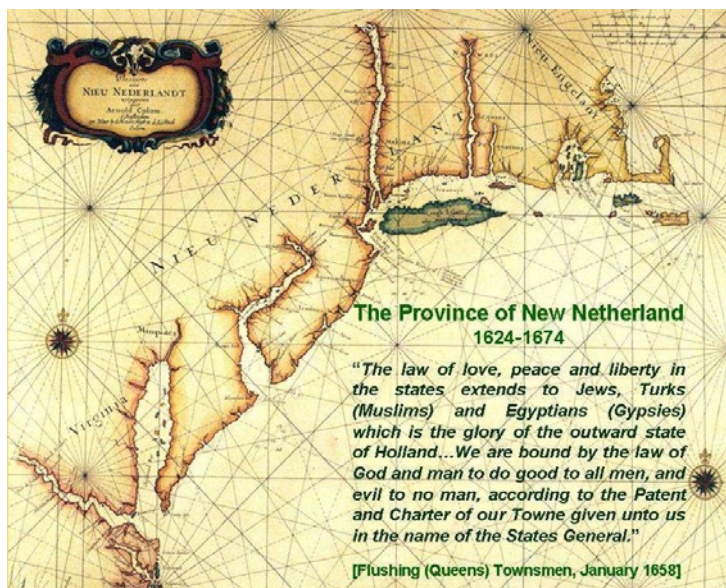


Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam
Still Existing Symbol of 17th-Century Toleration

Was toleration on Spinoza’s mind as being implicit to liberty in the Dutch Republic when he wrote: *“Ours has befallen a rare fortune to live in a republic where everyone is allowed complete freedom of conscience and God worship and where one doesn’t consider anything more precious and loving than liberty”*?⁽²⁴⁾ In his Tractatus-Theologico-Politicus he stated that *“the city of Amsterdam leads the fruit of this freedom in its own great prosperity and in the admiration of all other people. For in this most flourishing state and most splendid city, men of every nation and religion live together in the greatest harmony...his religion and sect is considered of no importance...In fact, the true aim of government is liberty”*.

In New Netherland, in matters of religion, Petrus Stuyvesant had sought to bolster the position of the Dutch Reformed Church by trying to reduce religious competition from non-Christian, non-Reformed denominations such as Jews, Lutherans, Catholics and Quakers. By consolidating his power and that of his church over the young pluralist society he hoped to forestall the possible destabilizing effects of ever increasing diversity on political harmony or, eventually, political survival. However, he was strongly rebuked by his superiors for his issuance of harsh ordinances between 1658 and 1662, aimed particularly at preventing the influx of Quakers who, then, were seen as ungovernable “*machinations of Satan*” and considered subversive, anarchistic agitators and a threat to the public order due to their non-conformist and vociferously proselytizing ways. Referred to by Stuyvesant as “*this new unheard of, abominable heresy*”⁽²⁵⁾, Quakers challenged the concept of order itself.

That the States General of the Dutch Republic didn’t make such explicit distinctions was already reflected in the 1645 patent for Flushing, now in New York’s borough of Queens. It had offered “*welcome*” in New Netherland to persons of “*tender conscience in England and elsewhere oppressed*” and provided “*the right to have and enjoy liberty of conscience, according to the custom and manner of Holland, without molestation or disturbance from any magistrates, or any other ecclesiastical minister.*”⁽²⁶⁾ Therefore, Stuyvesant’s 1657 ordinance against Quakers drew the immediate wrath of the townspeople who drew up a “*remonstrance*” signed by thirty-one townsmen. This “*Flushing Remonstrance*” demonstrated that religious liberty can never be taken for granted unless one is willing to vigorously defend it through “*broad awareness and conscious vigilance.*” As the remonstrance proved, it had not been enough that “*the law of love, peace and liberty in the states extends to Jews, Turks (Muslims) and Egyptians (Gypsies) which is the glory of the outward state of Holland...We are bound by the law of God and man to do good to all men, and evil to no man, according to the Patent and Charter of our Towne given unto us in the name of the States General*” as the Remonstrance would state.⁽²⁷⁾



In a final dispatch, on April 16, 1663, Stuyvesant’s superiors admonished to “*shut your eyes, at least not force people’s consciences, but allow every one to have his own belief, as long as he behaves quietly and legally, gives no offense to his neighbors and does not oppose the government. As the government of this city (Amsterdam) has always practiced this maxim of moderation and consequently has often had a considerable influx of people, we do not doubt that your Province too*

would be benefited by it.”⁽²⁸⁾

One year later, the tables were turned on Stuyvesant when his authority was challenged by another foe—this time not from below but from above. It was now a foreign adversary in possession of overpowering military might that would abridge his command, compelling him, in defense of his quasi-official church, to become an advocate of religious diversity in a pluralist culture. Article VIII, one of 24 articles of provisional transfer (in contradistinction to capitulation) that he and his town council negotiated with the English in September 1664, specifically provided for toleration. They were well aware that earlier, in March 1664, King Charles II (who had not yet guaranteed protection to English Jews) had resolved to annex New Netherland and install an Anglican government.

Frenetic appeals by Stuyvesant to his superiors for military help had gone unheeded. Instead, they sent him a letter, written on April 21, 1664, and received one month prior to the arrival of four English frigates, suggesting that liberty (*“freedom of conscience in religion”*) need not be defended but would take care of itself. They reasoned that English colonists in New Netherland, *“removed mostly from old England for the causes aforesaid”* would *“not give us henceforth so much trouble, but prefer to live free under us at peace with their consciences than to risk getting rid of our authority and then falling again under a government from which they had formerly fled.”*⁽²⁹⁾ A few months later it was all over, but by then cultural pluralism had taken root and protective measures been put into place for its continuance.

Twelve years after the definitive political end of New Netherland, in 1686, Governor Thomas Dongan described New York’s religious diversity as *“Here be not many of the Church of England; few Roman Catholics; abundance of Quakers; preachers, men and women especially; singing Quakers; ranting Quakers; Sabatarians; Antisabatarians; some Anabaptists; some Independents; some Jews; in short of all sorts of opinion there are some, and the most of none at all.”*⁽³⁰⁾

The meaning of the welcome extended the Ashkenazim and Sephardim in New Netherland, that *“they shall be allowed to sail and to trade in New Netherland and also be allowed to reside and settle there”*⁽³¹⁾, when viewed in its historical context, is complex. Their North American presence, and those of many others of diverse religious conscience as reflected in Thomas Dongan’s statement, was the result of religious diversity through the dynamic conception of tolerance. This historic notion is New Netherland’s inheritance to America. This bequest, in turn, is genealogically connected to New York’s birthfather whose lengthy, complicated biography is indispensable in understanding his North American offspring accurately.

A century after Dongan’s description of religious diversity in England’s latest territorial acquisition, New Netherland’s contribution toward religious plurality in the American

colonies allowed for a constitutional stipulation that *“no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.”*⁽³²⁾ Because this said next to nothing about individual rights, New York, amongst other states, insisted on the introduction of amendments to guarantee rights. The Bill of Rights was proposed on



March 4, 1789, to the states’ legislatures by no one less than John Adams as Vice-President of the United States and President of the Senate who, from 1780-1784, had been the Congressional envoy and first plenipotentiary minister of the United States at The Hague in the Dutch Republic. The First Amendment, its most important article, stated that *“Congress shall make no law prohibiting the free exercise of religion or respecting an establishment of religion.”*⁽³³⁾ On December 15, 1791, the U.S. Congress ratified this and nine additional articles because by then it had no other choice except for granting religious freedom in the Original Thirteen.

The fact remains that the vibrant notion of tolerance, whether religious, ethnic or racial, is no less important today than it was 350 years ago. Yet, there are few among us who understand that at the foundation of American heterogeneity—indeed, of Western Civilization as it is now conceived—lie the dual concepts of tolerance and liberty as equal partners. In a culturally intolerant society, constitutional freedom is meaningless unless actively defended: Tolerance as a basic human right demands reciprocal respect rather than unilateral accommodation. First established in the Americas by the Dutch on Governors Island in 1624, it provided the basis for New York’s cultural history and still serves as the lifeblood of American liberty. It was no accident or historical anomaly that the Virginian William Byrd, commenting on his visit to New Amsterdam in 1682, remarked that *“they have as many sects of religion there as at Amsterdam.”*⁽³⁴⁾



Opening of the 1675 Sephardic Synagogue in Amsterdam

In 1675—one year after New Netherland was ceded to the English for the second time, following a two-year war between the Dutch Republic and the English Kingdom—the grand Portuguese Synagogue was opened in Amsterdam. With more than 1,600 seats, the synagogue remained the largest in Europe for nearly two hundred years. Across from it stood the Great Synagogue of the Ashkenazim, which opened in 1671. By then, there were more than 2,500 Sephardim in Amsterdam and over 5,000 Ashkenazim, together constituting four percent of its population. Those two edifices now represent the only tangible symbols of the toleration which the Jews in particular fought for and earned in the 17th century.



1675 Sephardic and 1671 Ashkenazic Synagogues in Amsterdam

In the United States, the only naturally existing historic symbol to represent a fundamental American precept has yet to be popularly recognized: Governors Island in New York harbor, where the foundation of American pluralism through toleration was planted in 1624. In addition, the island was the place of birth of the states of New York, Connecticut, New Jersey and Delaware. These historic events were finally acknowledged three hundred seventy-eight years later, in May 2002, through Senate and Assembly Resolutions No. 5476 and No. 2708.

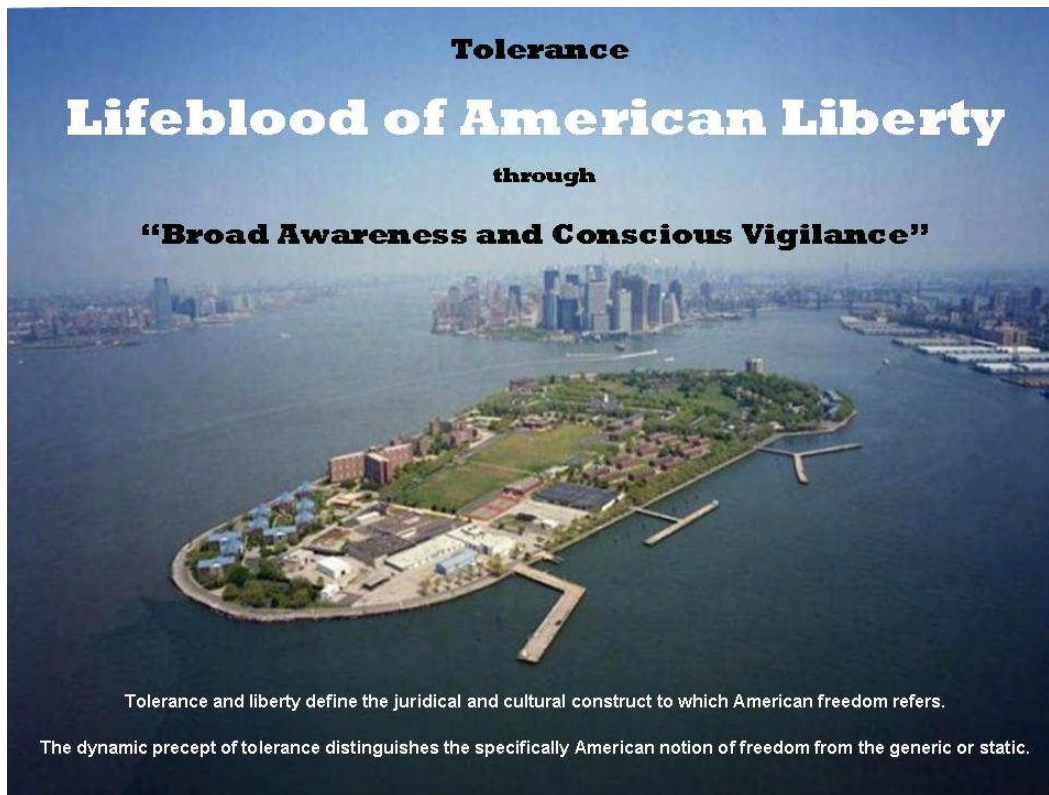
However, to restore the island to its historical integrity with its distinctive message of national substance, the legislature needs to do more. It also needs to preserve America's ultimate virtue and sustain it for future generations by dedicating 30% of the island to the proposed tolerance park Historic New Amsterdam with the envisaged Tolerance Monument as centerpiece. Doing so would compose an island triad in New York harbor of primary American values: Tolerance, Liberty and Welcome.



The sum of this iconic “National Heritage Triangle”, with each islet exemplifying its own unique facet of history, would be worth more than its collective parts and would promulgate that tolerance and liberty define the juridical and cultural construct to which American freedom refers—that the dynamic precept of tolerance distinguishes the specifically American notion of freedom from the generic or static.

Only then can New York State’s most important landmark, its birthplace, be broadly acknowledged as the nation’s earliest fundamental cultural asset and can serve as a physical reminder to the world that tolerance and liberty are indispensable partners.

In the way that a house of stone and brick is held together by cement, tolerance is the glue that holds this world together, that enables cultural diversity and mankind to prosper. When the cement fails, so will the house—as in intolerance. As a vibrant precept, tolerance demands reciprocity and reciprocal respect, not one-way accommodation. It requires ongoing struggle grounded in “broad awareness and conscious vigilance.”



When thus legislatively accomplished, applicants for U.S. citizenship—in order *“to gain a deeper understanding of U.S. history”*—may be asked the question on their civics test: *“Where in America started the concept of religious diversity first as a natural right and enduring cultural tradition?”* The answer would be: *“On Governors Island.”*

It would be the historically correct answer and beyond dispute: It is Governors Island’s national legacy; New York’s identity; and the Lifeblood of American liberty.

[Joep de Koning is the founder and CEO of the Foundation for Historic New Amsterdam, whose goal it is to establish on the southernmost 50 acres of Governors Island a nonprofit living museum park commemorating the introduction there of what is a fundamental American value: tolerance. Those interested are invited to visit the Foundation’s website, www.NationalHeritageTriangle.com]

Footnotes:

- (1) Civic Flash Cards, U.S. Government Printing Office, Stock # 027-002-00515-3
- (2) Dr. J. Briels, *De Zuid-Nederlandse Immigratie 1572-1630*, Fibula-Van Dishoeck, 21.
- (3) *The Great Events By Famous Historians*, Volume A.D. 1558-1608, The National Alumni, 1905 R.R. Howison, Settlement of Virginia, 353-356
- (4) Dr. F. C. Wieder, *De Stichting van [de stad] New York, Juli 1625*, Linschoten Vereeniging, XXXVI, “De Oorspronkelijke Regeeringsvorm van New York”, 17-35.
- (5) Van Rappard Documents, Document A, Provisionele Ordere, 2nd paragraph, 30 March 1624, Huntington Library, California.
- (6) Article 13 of the 1579 Union of Utrecht; “*dat een yder particulier in sijn religie vrij sal moegen blijven ende dat men nyemant ter cause van de religie sal moegen achterhaelen ofte ondersoucken*”.
- (7) J. Franklin Jameson, *Narratives of New Netherland, 1609-1664*, (Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York), Jogues, Novum Belgium, 260.
- (8) Oliver J. Thatcher, ed., *The Library of Original Sources* (Milwaukee: University Research Extension Co., 1907), Vol. V: 9th to 16th Centuries, 1581 Act of Abjuration, 189-197.
- (9) Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776.
- (10) John Adams, Memorial to the States General, Leyden, April 9, 1781.
- (11) The arrival of the Ashkenazim (with passports) and the Sephardim (without passports) took place in 1654. *Official residency* was granted to the Sephardim in 1655. The granting of *citizenship* for any New Netherland resident became possible only upon the introduction of the *burgherrecht* in 1657. That privilege of citizenship to the first Jew, was conferred upon the Ashkenazi Asser Levy (originally from Vilna in Poland) in that same year, 1657, three years after his arrival in August 1654. George L. Smith, *Religion and Trade in New Netherland*, Cornell University Press, 1973, 212, 216. Leo Hershkowitz, “By Chance of Choice: Jews in New Amsterdam 1654, “de Halve Maen”, 77 (Summer 2004), 23-30.
- (12) New York Colonial Manuscripts, Dr. Charles Gehring, trans., (1977), 12:18.
- (13) “Memorie van Usselinx, ‘s-Gravenhage 27 maart 1645 aan de Staten-Generaal der Vereenigde Nederlanden”, Nationaal Archief, arch. Staten-Generaal, inv. Nr. 5774, printed in C. Lichtenberg, Willem Usselinx (Utrecht 1914), bijlage IV, no. 1, p.cx-cxx, ald. cxvi. “*‘t Is door vreemde, dat ‘t landt volckrijckt wordt, daer syne macht meest in bestaet, die van buyten kommen, hier nederslaen, trouwen ende vermenichfuldigen. Want als men in de groote steden van Hollandt de vreemde met haer kinderen end kintskinderen afsonderde, soo soude de reste een minsten hoop maecken.*” Joep de Koning, trans., (2004).
- (14) See Article VIII of the original Dutch-language version of the Provisional Articles of Transfer, August 27, 1664, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Den Haag: “The Netherlanders here shall keep and enjoy the freedom of conscience in religion” (“*The Duytsen alhier sullen behouden / ende genieten vryheydt van conscientie in godsdienst.*”).
- (15) Roelof Ioosten, “Menasse Ben Israels Welkomst”, (Amsterdam 1642), 5, 6 Nationaal Archief, Den Haag.
- (16) Ben Israel, “Humble Address”, (Amsterdam 1655), Fol. 1: 8, Nationaal Archief, Den Haag.
- (17) Jewish Theological Seminary’s *Encyclopedia Judaica*; “The community received from the Crown a formal promise of protection, and in 1673, after another petty persecution, a guarantee of freedom of worship, which was confirmed in similar circumstances in 1685.”

- (18) Mozes Heiman Gans, *Memorboek, Bosch en Keunig*, (Baarn, 1977), 99.
- (19) Oddette Vlessing, "The Portuguese-Jewish Merchant Community in seventeenth-century Amsterdam, in C. Leger and L. Noordegraaf, comps., *Entrepreneurs and Entrepreneurship in Early Modern Times: Merchants and Industrialists within the Orbit of the Dutch Staple Market* (Amsterdam, 1996), 238.
- (20) Vlessing, 231.
- (21) Wim Klooster, *The Dutch in the Americas 1600-1800* (John Carter Brown Library, Providence, Rhode Island, 1997), 2: 20 and 3: 25.
- (22) Today, while lifting the Torah scroll at the beginning of the service according to the rites of the Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel, the leader of the Theba still chants a prayer in the Hebrew and Portuguese languages for the Dutch royal family and the government in honor of that historic relationship between the House of Orange and the Jewish nation and as pledged by Menasseh ben Israel, 364 years ago, during the official visit to the Amsterdam Sephardic synagogue in 1642 by "Frederic Henric, PRINCE van ORANJEN" and his son Prince Wilhelm: "And in order to demonstrate so much better our affection to Your Illustrious House, we have thought it to be proper to include with our usual Prayers some opening prayers for your Right-honorable Son Wilhelm to commemorate this day on which Your Highness together with him accredited our Synagogue with this honor. We hope that such Prayers from us shall not be disagreeable to you after the same have been welcomed by the Persian Monarchs and Roman Kaisers. May God forever save You, Great and Invincible Prince, together with Your Right-honorable son, for our Fatherland and us." [*Ende op dat wy dies te meer onse genegentheyt tot Uwes Doorluchtigheys Huys bewysen, soo heeft het ons goet gedacht dat wy voortaan eenige voorbiddingen, voor V Hoogh-geboren Soon Wilhelm, by onse gemeene Gebeden sullen doen, ter gedachtenisse deses daegs, op welke Vwe Hoogheyt tegelijck met hem, onse Synagoge verwaerdight heeft dese eere aen te doen. Wy hoopen dat dese onse Gebeden V niet onaengenaem sullen wesen, nadien deselve der Persen Monarchen en Roomsche Keyzers toegelaten hebben. God wil V, Groote en Onverwinnelicke PRINS, lange, met V Hoogh-geboren Soon, voor onse Vaderlant, end ons bewaren.*] (Menasse ben Israels Welkomst, Roelof Joosten, Boeckbinder in de Baefges-steegh, Amsterdam, Anno 1642, 6) Joep de Koning, trans., (2004).
- (23) Orde van Regieringe in West-Indien, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Den Haag.
- (24) Gans, *Memorboek*, Introductory Page.
- (25) *Records of New Amsterdam*, Vol. ii, 346, 347.
- (26) Haynes Trebor, *The Flushing Remonstrance (The Origin of Religious Freedom in America)*, (New York, Bowne House, 1957), 12
- (27) *The Flushing Remonstrance*, December 27, 1657.
- (28) W.I.C. directors to Stuyvesant, April 16, 1663, *Ecc. Rec.*, 1, 530.
- (29) J. Franklin Jameson, *Narratives of New Netherland, 1609-1664*, (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York), 461.
- (30) *Col. Doc.*, 2, 415
- (31) *New York Colonial Manuscripts*, Dr. Charles Gehring, trans., (1977), 12:18.
- (32) 1787 Constitution of the United States, Article VI.
- (33) First Amendment of the Bill of Rights.
- (34) William Byrd to Bro. Dan'l per Ruds, March 8, 1685/86, *Virginia Historical Register and Literary Companion*, 2 (1849), 208 (misprinted 108).