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Jonathan Groubert: From Amsterdam, This is Bright Minds, the podcast from the John Adams Institute, a treasure trove of the best and the brightest of American thinking. I'm Jonathan Groubert, and this week's guest is Russell Shorto, whose book *The Island at the Center of the World* is all about how America's nearly forgotten Dutch history made America what it is today. Right down to the way we talk.

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Russel shorto: Americans eat cookies rather than biscuits because of the Dutch of New Amsterdam made cookies. Not too many Americans are aware that the American Santa Claus comes from the Dutch "Sinterklaas" in the streets of New Amsterdam, and whether Americans are referring to their employer or to Bruce Springsteen, they probably have no idea that the Americanism "boss" comes straight out of the streets of New Amsterdam.

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Jonathan: We know, and we love the writer Russell Shorto here at the John Adams, as he used to be our director before he moved back to the United States. But way back in 2004, he released an eye-opening book called: *The Island at the Center of the World*, an historical retelling of the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam before it became New York, of course. Actually, this book is more than a history. It makes the case that so many of the things that we think of as American; the expansive, unruly, mercantile melting pot, started at that small Dutch trading post at the southernmost tip of Manhattan island. And those are the points Mr Shorto made when he came to Amsterdam in 2004 and spoke at the West Indische Huis or West India House. The West India House was itself a great location for this topic, as it's the former headquarters of the West India Company: The organization that founded New Amsterdam in the first place. And it's a period wrapped in mystery and ripe for discussion because, as you'll hear him explain, for some reason, historians have widely ignored it. Here's Russell Shorto.

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Russel Shorto: Before I get into things, I just want to thank Monique Knapen and the John Adams Institute for inviting me and to thank you all very much for coming. I'm overwhelmed at the, at the reception here and I also want to thank Clifford Sobel, the American ambassador, among other things, for buying 150 copies of my book and distributing them to members of the Dutch government. Uh, well, I have to say that, when I was writing this book, it certainly never occurred to me while I was researching and writing about the history of the Dutch Republic in the 17th century that the book might one day be published, let alone read, in the Netherlands. The thought would have frozen the hand that held the pen. I am a journalist and I would, I would strenuously resist the attempt, any attempt, to classify me as an authority or expert on the Dutch golden age. Before, however, I get into the matter of the book itself. Let me tell you a little bit about how Americans have traditionally viewed their country's founding.

Americans are used to thinking of their story as beginning with 13 English colonies, to thinking of American history as an English route onto which over time the cultures of many nations were grafted to create its famed melting pot. And the heart of that, the progenitors of the American saga are the Puritans and pilgrims of New England. Now, these pious men and women left England to escape religious persecution and established a new

society. They saw America as the biblical promised land, and as they flourished over time, they saw their success as an indication of God's favoring of their enterprise. The story is enshrined in the American myth, and in American myth in the Thanksgiving holiday, which comes up in a week or so. And also in the 19th century phrase that signifies their God given right to the continent to "manifest destiny." It was felt to be the biblical destiny of these transplanted English settlers to exploit the land to move westward across the continent. Presidents and opinion leaders use this as their justification for taking land from Indians and most of America's revered founding fathers: Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, George Washington hailed from one of the two regions first settled by the English. The Virginia Colony or the New England colonies. The early presidents all came from those two regions. They were the power centers of the new nation.

Well, what all this ignores is that there was another European colony founded on American shores. It was located smack in between these two English settlements, with its capital on the island of Manhattan. It pre-dates the 13 so-called original English colonies. It was not English, but Dutch, and it made a lasting impact on American culture. Measuring that impact is an impossibility. But its contribution has been so thoroughly ignored that it deserves to have repeated attempts made at measuring it. It deserves, in other words, to become a part of America's history. The book that I wrote is but one attempt to make it, so there are other people working right now on parts of this colony's story, and we can hope that in the near future their work will to continue, will continue to change and broaden the view in the US and in the Netherlands of how America was shaped by Europe. And I thought I would stop right here and mention just a couple of those people on whom I relied and who are true experts in the field of new Netherlands studies.

Professor Willem Frijhoff, of the Vrije Universiteit here in Amsterdam, is a distinguished historian who has worked, who has written, a great deal on the New Netherland colony and on whose work I have relied enormously. And Willem, are you here somewhere? He's here. Jaap Jakob's, a historian trained at Leiden University, who has written on the tolerance and the waning and waxing of tolerance in in 17th century Netherlands is here as well, and he is now currently at work on a biography of Peter Stuyvesant, which is long overdue first, for someone who have done it. Jaap Jacobs is here. Am I right that Jeremy Banks is here? OK, he's not I was told Jeremy Banks would be here of the Pilgrim Museum in Leiden. These are just two of the many people who, on whose work I have relied in writing my book. I myself am not a historian. I'm a journalist. I write for the New York Times. I got into this originally by living in the East Village of Manhattan. And at the time, our oldest daughter, who was about three years old, needed a space to run around and play in. The nearest open space was the churchyard of St Mark's in the Bowery on Second Avenue. And it just so happens that the tombs of many of the early families of New York are located in that churchyard. And the most notable tomb is that of Peter Stuyvesant, who was buried actually into the foundation of that church. And the reason for that, is this was the original site of his family chapel.

This area of New York City is very urban and has long been a kind of countercultural haven home to beat poets and hippies and punks. To people like Trotsky, W.H. Auden, Charlie Parker and in my time, Joey Ramone, who I used to see there all the time. But it was

once home of a less radical and to some, a considerably less exciting figure, and that is Stuyvesant. In the in the 1640's to the 1660's, Peter Stuyvesant was attempting to tame this land, this wilderness, into his farm. But seeing his tomb, I think, sparked something in me. A simple wonder, first of all, that this urban area was ever once a wilderness. There are many New Yorkers who consider that part of the city still a wilderness, but of a different story. And I suppose that I was impressed by my lack of knowledge of New York's Dutch beginnings. So I eventually contacted some historians and was in turn impressed by their lack of knowledge of Dutch New York. I soon learned that this is a period that has been ignored so thoroughly that even historians of colonial New York would throw up their hands, and this happened, repeatedly with throw up their hands and say to me; "Oh, the Dutch, I don't, I don't know the Dutch period. I don't go there." So that only intrigued me further. Eventually, someone suggested that I get in touch with a man named Charles Gehring.

Now, previous generations of American colonial historians, perhaps thanks in part to their ignorance of the topic, at least some of them, have been dismissive of the Dutch presence in America, considering it a muddling settlement on and around Manhattan, which only began to take shape once the English took over, renamed it New York after James, the Duke of York. And then, according to their reckoning, the real history of the area got underway. The English and the Dutch of the 17th century were rivals, competitors, enemies sometimes. Probably the last thing that would have occurred to the new English rulers of New York would have been to stop and write a history of the region under its Dutch auspices. It's also much easier to ignore a society if you ignore what it left behind. One historian of a century ago wrote, conveniently, quote: our original sources of information concerning the early Dutch settlers of Manhattan Island are neither many, nor rich, the Dutch wrote. Very little, and on the whole, their records are meager. Now, contrast that statement with a remarkable estimate from the scholar Keith Springer, that over the course of the 17th century, the Netherlands produced one half of all books published worldwide. As you are no doubt aware that your forebears were an astoundingly literate and word happy people. And in fact, the colony did keep records, as I learned in the first conversation I had with Charles Gehring in the summer of 2000. There are 12000 pages intact of the Colonies official records, only about 20 percent of which had previously been accurately translated and published, and so made a part of the historical record. That was until 1974, when Dr Gehring began his work as translator of the archives.

For the past 30 years, working in his office in the New York State Library in Albany and through the organization, he has founded the New Netherland project. He has diligently, painstakingly translated and published these records, preserving the deeds of the Dutch colony centered on Manhattan. The records are detailed; court cases, counsel, minutes, correspondence. They show a thriving, churning society, some might say a smelly society. Certainly that society doesn't have the fine mythic features of the Puritan saga that America has long preferred on Dutch Manhattan. There were, I must tell you, lots of smugglers, pirates and prostitutes. And there was a great deal of drinking, a very great deal of drinking. There were, by one account, 18 languages being spoken in its capitals, few muddy streets at a time when there were perhaps only 500 people living there. So it was truly a mixed assortment. And you would you might say it was Manhattan right from the beginning. But these records also show that these people were aware of their place in the world, aware of

the geographic strategic importance of their colony and of the island. They were putting down roots. They were intermarrying. They had formed a complex society. It was unlike any other in the new world, and for all its diversity, the society followed Dutch customs, Dutch government, Dutch language and culture. When I first contacted Dr. Gehring, it was with an eye to write a magazine article, but it happened at the annual seminar he hosts. The Rensselaerswijck Seminar was coming up the next month and he suggested that I come. So at the 2000 Rensselaerswijck Seminar, I met 100 or so people, most of them historians, who were working in one aspect or another of this colony. And I realized from talking to many of them that, as his work had progressed and reached a kind of critical mass, dissertations and books had been published and were being published, and a kind of mini movement was under way in effect, a new way of looking at how America started.

In time, my plans changed, I began to think of writing a book. A popular history that would be an attempt to set this colony into American colonial history. My conceit was in a way, simple: The story of American beginnings has always been told from the perspective of Boston. I wanted to shift the focus from Boston to Manhattan or to put it another way; American history has always been told from an English perspective. And looking at the Dutch settlement of New York, the story is always of them. Them, meaning the Dutch and the rest of the mixed settlers, they're muddling around until we, meaning the English, took over and organize things properly. But not only did the Dutch colony make an imprint on American culture, the settlers of the colony did not go away. As I tell American audiences, they are also us, and I have certainly received reassurance on this point from the hundreds of people who have contacted me, whose letters begin as follows; "I have just finished reading your book. Perhaps you would care to hear in great detail about my ancestor from the Dutch colony." And then there, follow many pages.

Let me back up a bit and briefly give some historical perspective here. The time is, of course, the 17th century, and there are two rising powers in Europe: England and the Dutch Republic. In the book, I refer to this as the first era of globalization, when these empires are fighting for control of pieces of the globe that they can exploit for furs, spices, salt, textiles and so on. In North America, the commodities are the beaver and tobacco, and the English have established two colonies: The New England colonies, and Virginia to the South. And the Dutch have laid claim to this large swath of territory right in between which they called New Netherland, which was not. I find that even people who are fairly knowledgeable and who have lived in New York all their lives, are confused about exactly the geographic scope of the Dutch presence. The colony, extended from north of Albany, New York, which is 150 miles north of New York City, all the way south to Delaware Bay and the Delaware River, and included all or parts of what would be five future states New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, Delaware and Pennsylvania. There were settlements on Long Island, including Brooklyn and Staten Island, named, of course, for the state's general on the Connecticut River away to the south at the redundantly named Schuylkill. Its capital New Amsterdam, was not Manhattan itself, but was the tiny portion at the southernmost tip of Manhattan, whose northern boundary was the wall built in 1653. Not as is sometimes thought to keep the Indians out, but to keep the English out. The wall of the street that that came to run along the wall, of course, became known as Wall Street. The second city of this colony was called Beverwijck, and it eventually under the English, became known as Albany. And if you think for a moment

about this strategic location of these two sites, these two cities, you get a sense for, and you move forward, you get a sense for, in a way, how prophetic the Dutch inhabitants of the colony were. The point of the existence of the colony for much of its life was the beaver trade in. Iroquois Indians would bring beavers down beaver pelts down the Mohawk River Valley, and at the point where it intersected with the Hudson River was where the Dutch built their fort, Fort Orange, where they would trade for these pelts. They would then pack them onto ships and send them down river to Manhattan, where from which they would be shipped to Europe. And if you jump ahead to the 1820s, when the Erie Canal is built, what you see is that, what the canal in effect did was, bridge gaps. Bridge here is exactly the wrong word. I don't know that it would make it a contiguous waterway all the way from that juncture to the Great Lakes. And when that happened, New York City took off in its industrial era. Might the cities around that confluence Albany and Schenectady and Troy did, and the cities all over the Great Lakes of the United States sprang into being.

So there's a sense in which these Dutch settlers foreshadowed what was to come. So for me. This began with the kind of initial wonder seeing in the records of the first Manhattanites. These people who would sling a rifle over their shoulders and go hiking up to hunt in the wilds of Midtown Manhattan. Just to set the scene a bit on Manhattan: It was a wooded island with swamps, deer, wolves, mountain lions and black bear. There were two Indian groups. I haven't. They were called the Wecquaesgeek and the Manhattan, and I have not been able to determine or talk to anyone who has been able to say whether or not they were in fact distinct groups or different names for the for the same Indian group. There was an Indian settlement called Sapokanikan which later assumed the Dutch name Greenwyck, and it's presumably from that that Greenwich Village was named. The one trail through this wilderness, the Indian Trail called the Wickquasgeck Trail, and I may be butchering the pronunciation there. The Dutch adapted and adopted, and they gave it the grand title of the Heeren Wegh, which was certainly ground for what was throughout the period, just a dirt path through the wilderness. The English, of course, called it Broadway. This is a Dutch colony, but in a sense, you have to put the word Dutch in quotation marks because right from the start it is strangely mixed. The reason for the mixed population and here, I fear that I'm telling many of you what you already well know.

The Dutch Republic itself was the melting pot of Europe in the 17th century. People came from all over fleeing religious persecution and warfare. This was the great age of religious warfare when it was held that a strong society meant having a single religion, a single language intolerance was more or less official policy. These Dutch provinces flew in the face of that and became a great empire, in part by exploiting or finding a way to manage their diversity. So when they formed a colony on a wilderness island called Manhattan. It had a mixed character, a mix of people, a uniquely Dutch commitment to free trade and as social glue this idea called tolerance. Now, no sooner do I raise this grand idea of Dutch tolerance than I fear I must shoot it down or at least qualify it. Tolerance was, as I'm sure many of you know, part of the national debate in this country in the 17th century. And I have to report that it was a strange experience researching the topic of the origins of tolerance both in the Netherlands and America over the past few years. At a time when both of those countries have gone through backlashes of intolerance regarding immigration and such matters. And it's honestly eerie to be here this week when this country is facing a new

question about its tolerant tradition. But this, too, follows history for these matters are cyclical. When a society is feeling comfortable and secure. Tolerance of differences is lauded as a national goal. When the society is feeling threatened, the gates slam shut. But even at its fullest extent, this idea of tolerance in the 17th century has to be qualified. It didn't mean what it does today. Tolerance, both in the Netherlands and in the American colony didn't mean celebrating diversity. It meant something more like putting up with or not burning someone at the stake as a witch because you don't agree with the person's religion. And it had all sorts of flaws, for one thing, it didn't exactly apply to slaves. Indians were put in a different class entirely, as were Jews. But I believe it was a step forward. The Dutch Republic was regarded by visitors as a strange place because of its relative openness to others. And in the New Netherland Colony, its leaders at times, waved this idea of tolerance like a flag as they tried to attract settlers from the more populous English colonies. In fact, this was one ironic way the colony increased its population. English settlers left England seeking religious freedom in the new world, only to find that the Puritans, once they had had established their religious utopia, were even more brutally intolerant than in the home country. And so these newcomers fled to South to Manhattan on the rebound and became part of the mixed society there. So the undercurrent of this book is an odd connection that history has largely overlooked that the advent of tolerance in the Dutch Golden Age got transplanted in some form to Manhattan Island and there helped shape American history.

The Dutch colony has been ignored or marginalized because of the old saw that history is written by the winners. In 1664, the English took over the colony from their rivals, changed New Amsterdam to New York and beaver back to Albany. And as far as English history was concerned, that date marked the beginning of the area's true history. But the Dutch colony didn't vanish, it is still here. It's part of American life. I have a fondness for trifles. But as Sherlock Holmes said, nothing is so important as trifles. Americans eat cookies rather than biscuits because of the Dutch of New Amsterdam made cookies. Coleslaw, for better or worse, is a staple of the American diet, and Americans have no notion that when they say it, they are speaking Dutch. Similarly, not too many Americans are aware that the American Santa Claus comes from the Dutch Santa Claus in the streets of New Amsterdam. There is evidence that the American Office of District Attorney, a public prosecutor, derives from the Dutch schout and you actually see in the in the changeover from the Dutch to the English records. They keep the English, keep the office and the Schout becomes a scout for a time. And whether Americans are referring to their employer or to Bruce Springsteen, they probably have no idea that the Americanism boss comes straight out of the streets of New Amsterdam. These little inherent inheritances tip us off to the grand one: the melting pot America's pluralistic society. This colony was I would put forth one of the places of origin of that notion. Now, different people will be more or less comfortable with the notion of drawing lines, connecting that time to ours. As I said, it's impossible to measure the extent of that little colony's influence on what would become this vast country called the United States. But it was located in the most strategically important region, and its influence on New York City is, I think, undeniable. And there is, I think, real value in the symbolic.

Creation myths are the story societies tell themselves when they are reminding themselves of what they aspire to. America has long revered the Puritans as its symbolic founders. But that symbolism grew into symbolism of power and exploitation. So I would like

to offer, as shall we say, a tonic or alternative to that American ideal, the humble Dutch colony of New Netherlands, with its messy collection of inhabitants of many different nations and languages, held together, however tenuously by this notion of tolerance. And offer it up as a second creation myth for my country. America prides itself on its melting pot society, its Statue of Liberty giving welcome in New York Harbor. That side of the American story has taken a beating in the years since nine eleven, but the World Trade Center towers stood in what was once New Amsterdam. It's not a coincidence that that very spot was America's first melting pot, an epicenter of free trade and diversity begun by the Dutch, which grew to become Wall Street a lowercase World Trade Center. I think it would be wonderful if the story of New Netherland were to spread in both countries and that with it, people would contemplate the various ties between the two. There are striking similarities in their founding; both founded in revolution, each with a founding father. Each originally conceived as a republic. John Adams, for whom this institute is named, in his capacity, is the first American ambassador to the Netherlands was struck by this and wrote in 1782: "The originals of our two republics are so much alike that the history of one seems, but a transcript from that of the other. So that every Dutchman instructed in the subject must pronounce the American Revolution just and necessary or pass a censure upon the greatest actions of his immortal ancestors." And just to step back from the lofty to the mundane, I'd like to leave you with a simpler notion of what it means to me to dig into history. The simple idea of trying to know the past to touch people who once lived. It was perfectly expressed by the great Dutch historian JH Huizinga, who began his magnificent essay on the Dutch civilization in the 17th century With these words: "we cannot do better than start from that mainspring of all historical knowledge, our perpetual astonishment that the past was once a living reality." Thank you all very much.

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Jonathan Groubert: Former Adams Institute director Russell Shorto talking about his book; *The Island at the Center of the World* back in 2004. And just a personal note here. The first documentary I ever made was about the New Netherland project. These days, it's called the New Netherland Institute, and you can find a link to it in the show notes.

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Jonathan Groubert: Did you know that you can go to our website, www.john-adams.nl/videos, where there's a link to the video of this extraordinary event? We also have a newsletter you can sign up for and a veritable treasure trove of great American thinkers and speakers at www.john-adams.nl. And while you're there, why not become a member of the John Adams? Not only will you support what we do. You get a discount to future live events. In the meantime, you should go to wherever you get your podcasts and leave a review of this show. This will help get the word out, and we can keep on sharing the very best of American thinkers in Europe with you, free of charge. That's it for this week's show. Our theme song is called *La Prensa* by the Parlando's. Our editor is Tracy Metz. From Amsterdam, this was *Bright Minds*, the podcast from the John Adams Institute. I'm Jonathan Groubert. Thank you for listening.

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