This island carries a meaning of historic as well as cultural importance to the descendants of three continents; Europeans, Africans and American Indians. Namely, Jan Rodrigues from Santo Domingo, a Latin-American of African ancestry and a free man, was the first person to summer on Governors Island in 1613. Rodrigues served as interpreter and on-the-spot factor in trade negotiations with the Hudson River Indians on behalf of the private Amsterdam fur trader and explorer Adriaen Block. In 1624, this was also the landing place of the first colonists from the Dutch Republic. Their arrival was a vital turning point for North America because they took with them most specific directives. The settlers had received instructions which incorporated the laws and ordinances of the states of Holland. It meant the end of the law of the ship in the New Netherland territory and the beginning of the Dutch Republic’s only overseas province ever.
Ten years earlier, the Amsterdam merchant explorer, Adriaen Block, had named the North American territory between 40 and 45 degrees latitude “New Netherland”. It was the States General of the Dutch Republic which had promised a trade monopoly for that territory to anyone willing to explore, survey and chart the area. Together with his partner, Hendrick Christiaensz, Block undertook four journeys of commercial exploration starting in 1611. He surveyed and charted the coastline and all river inlets between 42 degrees and 40 degrees latitude—the area never before surveyed and charted by anyone — and delivered a map to the States General of the Dutch Republic in October 1614. The map gave him and his co-religionists a trade monopoly on behalf of “The New Netherland Company”.

First map to name the territory New Netherland, 1614

Explorer Adriaen Block’s map of 1614 was the basis for a patent between 40 and 45 degrees latitude
Block’s 1614 map was chiefly the result of the [covert] explorations of the Dutch East India Company with the yacht Halve Maen (Half Moon), captained by Henry Hudson in 1609. Hudson’s report of a new trade resource provided the motive for the States General to lure Dutch private merchant-traders into assuming the risk of exploring and charting the river region which the East India Company had discovered. The area above 42 degrees latitude had already been mapped in 1612 and 1613 on behalf of the Admiralty of Amsterdam which also had sent covert expeditions to find a northwest passage to China with the yachts Craen and Vos, captained by Jan Cornelisz May, Symon Willemsz Cat and Pieter Fransz. Other explorers, such as Samuel de Champlain, had previously surveyed the area above 42 degrees. The States General had thus opened the region below 42 degrees for further discovery and private fur trading by way of patents issued in its name. Justice remained based on maritime law only.
In 1609, the crew of the ship Halve Maen had landed on The Cape and named it New Holland before sailing toward the Chesapeake, then turning north along the coast and sailing up the river to, what is now named, Albany. The year 1609 was the beginning of the twelve-year truce between The Dutch Republic and Spain (April 9, 1609-1621) when unaccompanied and unarmed Dutch ships traversing the Atlantic would be free from attack by the Spanish enemy. New Holland was to become the northernmost point of the Dutch claim to the Province of New Netherland in 1624.
In 1624, Governors Island, then named Noten Eylant (Nut Island), became the locus for the transformation of the New Netherland territory to a North American province. The claim to the province was based on the Law of Nations: (1) Original Discovery in 1609; (2) Surveying and Charting from 1611–1614; and (3) taking Possession through Settlement in 1624. The island, therefore, represents the birthplace of New York State. Only in May 2002 was this historic event politically acknowledged by the State Legislature through Senate and Assembly Resolutions No. 5476 and No. 2708. The southern border of the province included the area between the 38th and 40th parallel—the Delaware Bay area. The Delaware River, then called “De Zuidt Rivier”, had been surveyed and charted by skipper Cornelis Hendricksz of Monnikendam on the yacht “Onrust” (“Trouble”) on behalf of the New Netherland Company in the years 1614, 1615 and 1616. However, the New Netherland Company had been unable to secure an exclusive patent for the Delaware Bay region at 38th and 39th degrees latitude from the States General.
Later, in 1620, Cornelis Jacobsz May, on behalf of the successor company of the New Netherland Company, further explored, surveyed and charted the Delaware Bay on the ship named Blijde Boodschap (i.e., "Joyful Message") from which he carried on trade with the Indians in 1620 on a non-exclusive basis. One of his six business partners focusing on exploration and trade in the Zuidt Rivier was Thijmen Jacobsz Hinlopen who was a prominent trader in corn from the Baltic carrying on trade to Genoa and Portugal. He was an insurer and also a director of the Northern Company. Cape Hinlopen, now spelled Cape Henlopen in Delaware, is named after him and became New Netherland’s most southern border on the 38th parallel.
In acknowledgment of the inevitable intrusion of the English above Cape Cod (see John Smith’s 1616 map as self-anointed Admiral of New England), and the fact that knowledge of the area above it was not founded on original discovery, charting and settlement, the claim to New Netherland’s northern border was reduced to Hudson’s landing at 42 degrees latitude. At the time this map was printed (in Holland by a Dutch engraver), the Pilgrims lived in comfort and freedom in the Dutch Republic since 1609. Yet, religious plurality was viewed by them as anathema to their orthodox belief. Afraid that the forces of tolerance would have a corruptive influence on their community and would force their assimilation into Dutch society, they departed in 1620 to become the first settlers in New England. To the south of New Netherland, at Jamestown in Virginia, the first settlers had established the Anglican Church at once and had been instructed to use 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”. Such a statement would prove to be unthinkable when the first settlers from the Dutch Republic landed on Governors Island in America in 1624.
What then is the meaning of all this? The Governors Island settlement was vital for New York’s heritage of cultural pluralism as the basis for religious and ethnic diversity. Its message became New York’s legacy to the nation on September 25, 1789, when religious freedom as an individual right was reintroduced and codified as a legal-political condition in the First Amendment on December 15, 1791. That inheritance originated on Governors Island and was rooted on the other site of the Atlantic in the year 1579. That year, the founding document of the Dutch Republic had stated that “everyone shall remain free in religion and that no one may be persecuted or investigated because of religion.” That’s what is called “tolerance” and Governors Island echoes that message.
The seventeen states of the Low Lands or Netherlands had been fighting a war of independence from Spain since 1568. The 1579 founding document was the legal-political acknowledgment of the existence of religious tolerance and further encouraged an open, pluralist society in an attempt to unify the Low Lands against Spanish intolerance and authority. The 1579 promulgation provided the impetus for further immigration of religious and economic refugees from all over Europe. It became the foundation for the emergence of Dutch economic might and of the largest seafaring nation in the world at the time.
The 16th-century had been the age of discovery as well as the age of the Reformation and intolerance. The official affirmation for religious freedom was therefore a highly unusual pronouncement at a time where anywhere else it was unpopular, and even unlawful, to respect the rights and opinions of others in matters of religion.
The transformation of the Seventeen Low Lands (Latin appellation: Belgium) into a ferocious beast to unite the seventeen states in one sovereign nation against Spanish intolerance (religious tyranny) was a major objective of William of Orange (the Silent) who led that fight. By 1581, the seven northern states were willing and able to declare their unilateral independence from Spain in the Act of Abjuration which was based on the Right-of-Man doctrine. This act effectively split up the Netherlands into a Belgium Regium under Spanish authority and a Belgium Foederatum in the north. From there, after William’s assassination in 1584, his sons, Maurice and Frederick Henry as Lord Lieutenants, continued the quest for freedom and liberty for all of the Seventeen Netherlands until 1648 when Spain signed a peace treaty with the Republic.
This Netherlands Lion tells you therefore of the very important direct relationships between American cultural history, early New York history, and the history of the Dutch Republic. Just read what the magistrates of Vlissingen, now Flushing in the New York Borough of Queens, wrote in 1658: “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.”

(Flushing, Queens, magistrates, January 1658)

Religious and ethnic plurality had characterized New York City’s population from the very beginning. Non-Christian, non-European diversity was a fact. Among Manhattan farms in the 1630’s one was owned by a Moroccan Muslim.
We can therefore say with confidence that New York’s birthfather was Leo Belgicus as he 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. This map 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, pluralist society.
The Right-of-Man doctrine as the basis for the Seven United States of the Netherlands, so formulated by a representative national assembly against a tyrannical ruler, was shared only with the 1776 Declaration of Independence of the Thirteen United States of America. The lion therefore also illustrates what are now America’s fundamental values of tolerance, liberty and freedom by way of New Netherland — now New York.
JOHN ADAMS IN 1781

“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”

This momentous historical link between the founding elements of the two republics was 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”.
What connected, at the time, the American and Dutch Republics in their quests for liberty and freedom can also serve as a roadmap to guide us toward shaping a successful global future OUTSIDE of our cultural redoubts. Namely, effective cross-cultural communication requires our understanding of what binds us together: We need to reintroduce that historic and profoundly important word on which our freedom is based. It is often misunderstood and sometimes misapplied or misappropriated. For the most part, its deeper and broader meaning of its dynamic properties is lost on many of us today. That word is “tolerance”.

What binds us together...
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. Always a two-way street, tolerance demands reciprocal respect rather than unilateral accommodation. It is the underpinning for successful pluralism on a macro and micro level. There are two versions of the precept of tolerance as the basis for successful cultural diversity; the pragmatic version which is based on global trade or commerce in its various forms; and, the virtuous, intellectual version which is based on “broad awareness and conscious vigilance”.

1609, Tolerance and World Trade
Globalization was made possible first by ocean-bound sailing vessels in the 16th and 17th centuries. These ships fostered cross-cultural global communications and opened up remote societies which up till then had been closed or dormant. For those whose primary goal was to seek opportunities for trade, the prospect of profit transcended issues of religion, ethnicity and race. Enduring success required mutual respect—not one-way exploitation—for indigenous cultures such as the Japanese or American Indians.
An immigrant culture requires tolerance as the basis for workable religious and ethnic diversity. This cultural tolerance became the legal-political foundation of the independent Dutch Republic; a haven for religious and economic refuges during the Reformation. It was extrapolated to America with the first settlers in 1624 and became the inspiration for the American Republic.
This precept of tolerance also became the basis for Dutch conduct with regard to its maritime activities and global trade. As a result, the Dutch Republic was a passionate promoter and defender of free seas and oceans, and performed the management of its eventual distant colonies in a differing manner than those of its competitor nations, ruled mostly by authoritarian or intolerant regimes.
Spanish-Portuguese Catholic missions seeking active religious conversion of the Japanese since 1548 had culminated in political-religious strife. As a result, the Shogun expelled the Spanish in 1624 whereas the Portuguese were ousted in 1639 after a Japanese-Christian rebellion in Shimabara in 1637. The legal-cultural tradition of tolerance enabled the Dutch to remain. By refraining from proselytizing and not forcing their language, culture or religion onto the Japanese they enjoyed a trade monopoly with Japan for 215 years.
As noted earlier, in North America, the founding of the province of New Netherland (now the New York Tri-state region) took place on Governors Island in the year 1624. The planting of those first settlers in 1624 was accompanied by very specific instructions. Namely, only “through attitude and by example”, could they attract the natives and non-believers to God’s word. They were instructed “not to persecute someone by reason of his religion and to leave everyone the freedom of his conscience".

“The dynamic precept of Tolerance distinguishes the specifically American notion of Freedom from the generic or static. The twin concepts of Tolerance and Liberty define the juridical and cultural construct to which Americans refer as Freedom.

“Through Attitude and By Example…”
Governors Island, 1624
Listen to the Antwerper Willem Usselincx, the spiritual founder of the Dutch West India Company, who proclaimed in 1645; “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 left-over population would be the lesser.”
What’s more, that historic 1579 founding document had a profound influence on the Western Hemisphere as it was also responsible for the opening of the first synagogue in the Americas at Recife in Dutch Brazil in the year 1642 as well as the “official” granting of full residency for both Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews at New Amsterdam, now New York City, in 1655.
Just a year before the Jewish arrival in New Netherland, the Amsterdam-born philosopher Baruch de Spinoza, a member of the Portuguese Israelite community had written: "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...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".
This particular notion of liberty was based on the dynamic notion of tolerance. It was exemplified by the opening of the Sephardic synagogue in 1675 at Amsterdam. It remained the largest synagogue in Europe for nearly 200 years; across the way stood the Great Synagogue of the Ashkenazim, opened in 1671.
Because the legal-cultural principle of tolerance was planted in 1624 by the first settlers to Governors Island, and because it is America’s ultimate virtue, we are seeking to facilitate the restoration of Government Island to its historical integrity with its distinctive message of national substance. When the State Legislature, in 2002, declared the island the legally acknowledged birthplace of New York State as well as the origin of American toleration, the island became the nation’s only natural historic symbol with an intrinsic message of profound national meaning.
In 1664, New Netherland citizens “shall keep the liberty of their consciences in religion” under future English jurisdiction (Articles of Transfer). This tradition and right to tolerance was codified in the First Amendment in 1791: “Congress shall make no law prohibiting the free exercise of religion”.

In America, upon an attempt by King Charles II to seize New Netherland and to install the Anglican Church in 1664, the Council of New Netherland negotiated that New Netherland citizens “shall keep the liberty of their consciences in religion” under future English jurisdiction (provisional Articles of Transfer). This right to tolerance became an enduring cultural tradition and was codified in the First Amendment in 1791: “Congress shall make no law prohibiting the free exercise of religion”.
Upon his visit to New Amsterdam in 1682, the Virginian William Byrd remarked that “They have as many sects of religion there as at Amsterdam”.

“The Visiting Virginian, William Byrd in 1682”

Tolerance—an active notion—demands. Always a two-way-street, not one-way accommodation, it defines and gives meaning to an otherwise undemanding, generic or static liberty.
The visualization of Governors Island’s thematic patrimony would transform it to a fundamental human right which will lead the complementary island symbols of Liberty and Welcome in New York harbor in historical priority and national significance. The restoration of the island’s legacy would compose a new iconic American tableau—the National Heritage Triangle of America’s primary values.
Since tolerance and liberty are equal partners of American freedom, we have sought the political reservation of 50 acres and their political dedication to an artisan canvas (30% of the island) which would feature America’s ultimate virtue through the creation of a masterpiece. This magnum opus will be a Tolerance Park with as centerpiece a Tolerance Monument which is envisaged to be exemplified by a 150-feet (46 meters) high version of Barnett Newman’s sculpture “Broken Obelisk”. It had been dedicated by him to the memory of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. after his assassination.
This symbol to hope will be of the same height as the Statue of Liberty (without its pedestal) and therefore helps to understand the dynamic meaning of tolerance in American liberty. This new icon, rooted in New York’s history, may help the world understand the meaning of American freedom, forever exporting it implicitly to the world rather than explicitly.
This conference is evidence that there is no reason whatsoever to bemoan the loss of New Netherland as a geo-political, geo-economic or geo-linguistic entity. Unfortunately, there are very few persons who understand history and many who only know history. In the latter category there are lots who would like to disparage Governors Island’s momentous legacy to the nation or, out of ignorance, would want to deny New York’s historic identity as central to American freedom. Often, the reasoning for ridicule or dismissal of the significance of New Netherland is that it isn’t “Royal” or “English” or existed for “just sixty years”. Yet, are they as likely to belittle or dismiss western civilization or Christianity because it isn’t “Royal” or “English” or because Jesus lived “only thirty years”? As portrayed by New York as immigration gateway since 1624 and by America’s political culture of personal freedom, American society is inarguably defined in terms of the twin concepts of tolerance and liberty; not by a culture of royal fiat, authoritarianism, a class society or social immobility. Indeed, tolerance and liberty define the juridical and cultural construct to which Americans refer as freedom.
Therefore, New Netherland’s geo-cultural contribution to America vastly overshadowed the contributions of its neighboring settlements of Virginia and New England in national meaning and historical substance. Specifically, it is the dynamic precept of tolerance that distinguishes the specifically American notion of freedom from the “generic” or “static”. Governors Island’s enduring legal-cultural contribution of 1624 serves as the foundation for successful cultural diversity and liberty. Indeed, it is highly relevant again to the 21st-century and may prove to be of immeasurable beneficence to the future of American freedom. Governors Island is its leading, natural historic symbol. Broad awareness and conscious vigilance of America’s ultimate virtue—the lifeblood of liberty—builds. Intolerance destroys. Check history!