



HISTORICAL SOCIETY *of the* NEW YORK COURTS

The Origins and Development of American Legal History in New York City (1609 – 1865)

Lesson Plan #1: New Amsterdam, New York, and Colonial Law in the New World

Background Reading: Russell Shorto, *The Island at the Center of the World; The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan and the Forgotten Colony That Shaped America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004) chs. 5 and 14.

Launching Off Questions (10 minutes):

1. What is this reading about?
2. How did life in New Amsterdam differ from Europe?
3. What is a colony? What is the purpose of laws in a colony?

Class Activity #1 (20 minutes):

Divide the class into three sections. Using the HSNYC's online section on "[New York Under Dutch Rule](#)," each group will analyze a key turning-point in the colony's legal history to get a better sense of how Dutch colonial rule over New Amsterdam transformed over time. Group #1 will read, "[The Eight Men \(1643 – 1647\) and the Remonstrance of the Manhatas](#)," Group #2 will read "[The Nine Men and the 1649 Remonstrance of the Commonality of the New Netherland](#)," and Group #3 will read "[The Flushing Remonstrance, 1657](#)." All groups will answer the following questions:

1. What is the historical event/document you are reading about?
2. What is its historical significance?
3. How did this event shape colonists understanding of the law in North America?

Class Activity #2 (15 minutes):

The entire class will read about the case [Crown v. William Prendergast](#) (1766) (available in the section "[Colonial New York Under British Rule](#)"). The class should be given 5 minutes to complete the reading and then have a discussions guided by the following questions:

1. What was this case about?
2. Who were the "levelers" and what was their goal?
3. What role did the courts play in shaping colonial life?
4. Was justice served in this court case?

Concluding Remarks (5 minutes):

Class Discussion: What was the purpose of the law in colonial North America?

Homework: Each student should create a colonial charter with at least five laws he or she believes would be necessary to uphold law and order in colonial New Amsterdam or New York.