Friday, June 14, 2024 / Party in the USA?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

NOAM HASSENFELD (guest host): New York City just turned 400 years old, and the city isn’t doing too much to celebrate. I wanted to mark the occasion, so I went down to the southern tip of Manhattan to find a monument which commemorates the first Dutch settlers that came here back in 1624.

NOAM: And, it's not here.

<SCORING IN> NOW It's a Mystery

NOAM: There's a huge construction project happening and either the monument is gone or it is under what looks like a nondescript wooden shack

NOAM: If New York is struggling to celebrate its birthday, what does that mean for America? America is turning 250 in 2026, and it’s already shaping up to be a battle. So how do we celebrate a city or a country this complicated? And should we even be celebrating it to begin with?

<SCORING OUT> NOW It's a Mystery

[THEME]

*<CLIP> BILLY JOEL: I’m in a New York State of Mind… REVERB*

NOAM: It’s Today Explained. I’m Noam Hassenfeld, filling in as host today.

*<CLIP> MIDNIGHT COWBOY: “Ayyyy! I’m walking here!”*

NOAM: Sorry about that. But we are here to talk about

<CLIP> New York, New York

NOAM: It’s the city that gave us James Baldwin, Andy Warhol, Biggie Smalls, Alicia Keys

*<CLIP> Empire state of Mind: New Yooooork*

NOAM: It’s been the setting for classics like the Godfather, West Side Story, Coming to America

<CLIP> PRINCE AKEEM: GOOD MORNING MY NEIGHBORS!

VOICE: HEY FUCK YOU!

NOAM: Anyways - In a lot of ways New York has shaped how America describes itself. And it’s actually *shaped America.* Almost half of all Americans have an ancestor that came through Ellis Island. So you’d think a city like this turning 400 would be cause for celebration.

RUSSELL: Where even 20 years ago, people might have celebrated things like this, now we look at it more nuanced. We see the negative, the darks and the lights, and we're trying to come to terms with it.

NOAM: Russell Shorto is the director of the New Amsterdam Project at the New-York Historical Society and he just curated an exhibit to mark New York’s 400th.

RUSSELL SHORTO (historian): It's called New York before New York.

NOAM: So … we wanted to talk to him about the anniversary – and why we should use it as an opportunity to acknowledge the good, the bad … and everything else in NYC’s history. We started with the events we’re now 400 years out from. When of course … there were plenty of people living here already when the Dutch showed up…

RUSSELL: This area, meaning the area that's now New York City, the five boroughs. It was the, territory of the people variously known as Lenape or, Delaware or Munsee and sometimes Lenni Lenape.

<SCORING IN> An Impression of Movement APM

NOAM: And How are these kind of first European immigrants integrating themselves?

RUSSELL: For those first years. They wanted to trade. They wanted to do business.

*SFX TV STATIC*

*<CLIP> One thing that really takes off and becomes a status of wealth is having a nice beaver fur hat*

*SFX TV STATIC*

*<CLIP> hunting the beaver to have this waterproof thick fur to create top hats*

*SFX TV STATIC*

*<CLIP> Hey cool hat*

After two years, when they decided they wanted a capital, they chose Manhattan Island. And one of the first things they did, we think, was to negotiate a deed with presumably the Lenape people. Now, I say, presumably because we don't have that deed anymore. the deed for Manhattan Island does not exist. What does, however, is a letter that a government official in the Netherlands wrote to his bosses, essentially saying, our people in our New World colony are in good health and they've planted crops and some of the women have given birth. And oh, by the way, they purchased the island of Manhattan.

SCORING HARD OUT REVERB

NOAM: Do you happen to have the text of that letter?

RUSSELL: Yeah. You want me to read the whole thing?

NOAM: How long is it?

RUSSELL: It's a couple of paragraphs, and it's a list of, animal skins.

NOAM: Maybe we we we might not need to list all the skins.

RUSSELL: Okay.

<SCORING IN>

SFX - PENCIL SOUNDS

<CLIP> Received 7th September, 1626. High and mighty lords. Yesterday, the ship arms of Amsterdam arrived here. They report that our people are in good spirit and live in peace. The women have also born some children there. They have purchased the island men hats from the Indians for the value of 60 guilders. It is 11,000 Morgans in size. They had all their grain sewed by the middle of May….

RUSSELL: So then they go on and list the grains, and they list the animal skins and so on.

SCORING OUT

RUSSELL: As we all know, the native people did not have a concept of real estate. And, you know, here, give me this money and this land is yours. They were saying, oh, you knew people want to come here. All right. We'll let you stay here. We're gonna continue to use this island, but we'll let you use it too. And in exchange, we'll get something out of it.

*<CLIP> AUSTIN POWERS:*

*DR. EVIL: Quid Pro Quo Mr. Powers.*

*AUSTIN POWERS: Yes. Squid Pro Row*

NOAM: So this is this moment that's kind of going to end up being pretty pivotal. Pivotal that the Dutch are saying they purchased the land the Lenape. We have reason to believe or not feeling like they are actually selling the land. As we move forward as more Dutch settlers come, what kind of ideas are the Dutch bringing with them? What kind of culture are they building here?

RUSSELL: Ironically, one of its foundations is tolerance. The Dutch, had established an official policy of religious toleration. 15, 20 years into the life of the colony. You have the report that there are 18 languages being spoken in New Amsterdam at a time when there were only about 500 people or so living there. So New York was New York even before it was New York.

NOAM: Yeah, sounds like Queens.

RUSSELL: And yet there are two huge exceptions to it. One is the treatment of Native Americans, and the other is almost from the start. A couple of years after the founding, enslaved Africans start arriving.

NOAM: Right.

RUSSELL: the famous wall at Wall Street, there are enslaved Africans who were participating in the building of that wall. So I think when you talk about tolerance, you have to look at it in terms of other white European Christians. While the Dutch Republic was founding this colony, they were also inventing the building blocks of capitalism. The concept of, a corporation, a permanent corporation, the concept of shares of stock and of anybody can buy a piece of this company. Elements of this kind of, you know, very modern trading practice. They bring as well.

NOAM: So this is what's really interesting to me, because New York clearly becomes this foundational city. But if you flash forward to today, it seems like it retains a lot of the hallmarks of the Dutch settlement, like it retains a lot of this religious liberty. It retains a lot of the focus on capitalism. It clearly retains a lot of the issues of racism that we talked about.

RUSSELL: Yeah.

NOAM: And I guess I wonder, has the city acknowledged any of those less good aspects?

RUSSELL: Oh I think in a lot of different ways we have been wrestling with how do we look at our past? How do we look at our history? Looking ahead to in 2026, we're going to have the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of American Independence. And, you know, it used to be like when I was a kid, you know, you you, you, you celebrated things like that.

*SCORING IN – On\_The\_Way\_Up\_2\_SON\_SONV\_0131\_00501\_APM-06*

*<CLIP> THE bicentennial celebration of America’s independence 200 years of liberty celebrated in a glorious birthday party.*

*<CLIP> Parades of square rigged sailing ships each over 200 feet in length streaming past the statute of liberty and massive fireworks.*

*<CLIP> Fireworks sound*

RUSSELL: And now people are saying is celebrate. Is that really what we want to do?

SCORING SLOWS AND FALLS

*<CLIP>TIKTOK: So I’m finna tell you how many presidents had slaves bitch and how many did they have. We starting with George Washington. George Washington…*

RUSSELL: We know that a lot of the Founding fathers owned slaves.

NOAM: Mh-hmm

RUSSELL: How do we deal with these conflicting aspects of our history?

*SCORING IN – ES\_Quietly Tense 1 - Gunnar Johnsén-04*

*<CLIP> NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: So the year 1619 marks the year that the first Africans were sold into the Colony of Virginia. And through this series of essays, we really argue that very little about modern American life has been left untouched by this foundational institution.*

*<CLIP> FOX 11: ANCHOR: Nikole Hannah Jones calls the 1619 project the most important work of her life. She says thats because instead of confronting the truth about the way our country was built we’re taught a story of American exceptionalism*

RUSSELL: To me, the only common sense way to to approach our past, we have to look at it all. We have to try to understand it all, ~~and we have to. I~~ think it's just as important to acknowledge these, what we see as clear failures, moral failures. It's also important to look at other elements that we see as foundational as creating our values and and say it, say that as well.

*<CLIP> FOX 11: Nikole Hannah Jones: No people had a greater claim to the American flag than we do*

SCORING OUT

NOAM: I wonder, has something recently changed?

RUSSELL: I mean, people have been saying this forever, or, you know, a lot of people have been saying, you know, that we've had this problems going back. I mean, that's what the Civil War was part of the an attempt to solve these problems that were baked into the country's founding, and the way the Civil War was settled didn't solve them at all. We didn't really, uncover all of the rot. So I think there have been a number of things that have gotten a huge amount of attention in the past 5 or 10 years that has really started to, make people reassess their understanding of and ask these questions about how do we approach the past.

NOAM: You know, I feel kind of torn about it because, you know, I live in Brooklyn. It's not too hard for me to see the Statue of Liberty. I feel often like New York is the reason that I have the life that I have. Like, my grandparents came here fleeing the Holocaust. Other of my grandparents came as survivors. Afterwards, they would tell stories about seeing the Statue of Liberty, like stuff that sounds like cliche, but I'm sure has applied to thousands and thousands and thousands of people. And I also recognize the stuff that we've talked about, stuff that's bubbled up more in the last 15 years, that has been more vocal in the last 15 years. And I guess I how do you weigh the two? How can you talk about one and the other in the same, in the same breath.

RUSSELL: I think everybody has to do that for themselves. I think one of the main problems of our era is that nuance is seen as like a bad word. You know, you have to be able to hold two conflicting things in your head at the same time. That's part of that's part of being a grown up. You know, that's part of being a grown-up

NOAM: 400 years old.

RUSSELL: Yeah, exactly. We have to know. So let's grow up. That's that's the message.

SCORING IN – Happy Birthday Robot C APM-02

RUSSELL: if we're only looking at our failures, then we've got nothing to stand on who we even are, we? You know, there are some people who don't want to look at them at all and only want to celebrate our heroes and their achievements. Well, that gives you this fake sense of history.

NOAM: Russell Shorto is the author of the book “The Island at the center of the World” and the director of the New Amsterdam Project at the New York Historical Society where you can catch his exhibit New York Before New York. Coming up, if New York can’t even toast itself, how messy is it going to get when the whole country turns 250 soon? It seems like… it’s gonna get messy.

SCORING OUT

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

TED JOHNSON (senior advisor, New America): I'm Theodore Johnson or Ted, and I am a senior advisor at New America and a contributing columnist at the Washington Post.

NOAM: In the first half of the show, we talked about New York's upcoming birthday, the 400th birthday. But New York is not the only big birthday we've got coming up here. America is turning 250 years old in a couple of years.

TED: That’s right .

NOAM: How big a deal is 250?

TED: Depends on who you ask.

NOAM: Okay.

TED: You know, you know, there are lots of historical foundations, museums, the federal government, frankly, that are putting a lot of resources or at least a lot of thought into how to celebrate this semiquincentennial in 2026.

NOAM: Semiquincentennial?

TED: That's right. Yeah. This is I always do a little language arts here. So Centennial we know that okay. That's 100. Quincentennial—Quinn is the five. So 500 semi, quin, half of 550. And that gets us to Semiquincentennial.

NOAM: That seems overly complicated.

TED: I've written before that it's we're due a Gen Z intervention here. This should be the quarter milli. It's a quarter of a millennium.

NOAM: Quarter milli. I like it.

TED: Quarter milli works!

SFX: “The More You Know” jingle

NOAM: So we got, we got a fun name Quarter Milli. What's the plan? What's in the works here?

TED: The federal government, some years ago passed legislation around the semiquincentennial to establish a commission mostly comprised of former members of Congress, former cabinet level secretaries that would engage the nation, the states, nonprofits, businesses, etc. to come up with the best ways to celebrate the the 250th anniversary of the signing of the the ratification of the Declaration of Independence, and then the, the founding of the United States of America.

*<CLIP> AMERICA250 AD: Fact is there have been challenges since the very beginning…*

TED: A lot of it looks a lot like you would expect it to exhibit local history contests, you know, sporting events, bringing ships into harbors where, you know, showcasing the Liberty Bell.

*<CLIP> CBS PHILADELPHIA:*

*MICHAEL NEWMUIS: The Philadelphia Historic District Partners will launch the red, white and blue to-do, a patriotic celebration.*

TED: Those are the kinds of things, and essentially trying to tell an updated story of America that isn't just backwards looking, but one that also imagines what could be next.

*<CLIP> AMERICA250 AD: We're launching America's invitation. A chance to share your thoughts on our past. The heroes who love. And your dreams for the road ahead.*

NOAM: We just spent the first half of the show talking about how the 400th birthday of New York City is this moment where people are kind of grappling with how to mark progress, and also how to weigh this massive historical baggage.

TED: Hmm.

NOAM: How is that factoring into plans for the 250th?

TED: Yeah, quite a quite a bit, actually. You know, I've looked at every 50 year anniversary since the founding of the country, and the one common thread is sort of the recitation of the national gospel. The Founding Fathers, you know, came up with this amazing idea. No country has ever existed like this one before because we're founded on an idea, etc., etc. all good, but it leaves out so many of the people who contributed to making this country what it is today at 250 years. So I think one of the prime focuses of America at 250 and at New America, we're calling it “Us @ 250” is incorporating the experiences, the histories, the stories of lots of Americans whose stories were not incorporated into previous celebrations in the same way.

NOAM: Yeah. Tell me a little bit more about the people who are left out of that story.

TED: Yeah. So I mean, like you, me and everyone listening here essentially, you know, when at the first presidential election of 1790, Jill Lepore has written, a historian has written, that only 6% of the people in these United States were eligible to participate in the first presidential election, and only half of them did so. Women only got the right to vote 100 years ago. And if you were black or a black woman or an immigrant, you know, maybe that wasn't until the Voting Rights Act of 65. So all of the people left out of democracy have essentially been left out of the story of America. We're sort of objects in the story instead of subjects, you know, people to be acted on, instead of people really using their agency to, to whatever extent they had it to compel the nation to be a true a version of who it proclaimed itself to be in the declaration and in the Constitution.

<SCORING IN> *Quietly Tense 1 - Gunnar Johnsén-04*

NOAM: Yeah, yeah. Talking about people who are left out, It makes me think of even that the moment we decide where to start this count is really important. You know, like there's all these years that could start, that could serve as the original birth day for America.

TED: Right.

NOAM: How do you think where we point as the start dictates what kind of story we tell about America?

TED: It's a big question. And I think what the federal government's doing and what we're doing at New America is focusing on the independence of the nation-state, the United States of America. So when when July 4th, 1776 shows up and we have, you know, that's sort of the date we recognize as the date the United States begins. There was already a nation here. And frankly, there are already many nations here. And never mind, you know, France, England, Spain. I'm talking about Native American tribes, black folks, immigrants from all, all over the place. So the nation was quite established before the nation state was. So for 250, it's about the ratification of the declaration, July 2nd. The real date, July 4th, is sort of the recognized one. And, and that is what we anchor it to with the understanding that the people that comprise the new nation state were not new people, that they were old people with, with long stories. Because what we've accomplished as a nation state, with all of these different nations of people is remarkable and something to be celebrated instead of something to sort of be washed aside just to to, you know, shoot fireworks and eat hot dogs.

<SCORING OUT> *Quietly Tense 1 - Gunnar Johnsén-04*

NOAM: Yeah. I mean, This whole kind of debate about where we start the history of this country has led to a lot of controversy. Right? Like in response to the 1619 project, there was the 1776 Commission.

TED: Right, right.

NOAM: Which was basically saying, no, no, no. The real start was 1776. This is the moment that made America America.

*<CLIP> DONALD TRUMP: To combat the toxic left wing propaganda in our schools. I announced last week that we are launching a new Pro American lesson plan for students, the 1776 Commission.*

TED: You know, I mean, the the 1776 Commission was essentially a counter 1619 project narrative endeavor.

*<CLIP> DONALD TRUMP: We will teach our children the truth about America, that we are the most exceptional nation on the face of the earth and getting better every single day. We're not going to let it fail.*

TED: My sense of it was that they're trying to recenter the national mythology about the origins of the nation as a way of countering the, the historical, work that was in the 1619 project. And, you know, it should be said that a lot of the terminology from that commission's work served as fuel for a lot of the anti DEI, anti-CRT,, anti racism state bills that we've seen across the country, where educators now can't talk about certain books, certain authors at newspapers or magazines. So it was not a super patriotic way of, of reestablishing a narrative that where there's consensus agreement on this is the story of the country. Rather, it was explicitly, in my view, a counter-narrative to the 1619 project.

*<CLIP> SENATOR JOHN THUNE: Critical race theory distorts the reality of American history. The 1619 project, for example, advances the totally fabricated claim that a primary motivation for the American Revolution was a desire to preserve slavery.*

TED: I guess they had the impression that if people don't hear the good news love story of America first, they may fall out of love with the place. But, you know, have you met a black person recently? You know, this is we are people who serve in the military, who have believe in all the aspirations and dreams and promises and ideas of America and were not only left out of it at the founding, but were enslaved in service of it against our will at the founding. And yet, insist on not, gaining power and sort of vengeance, but rather just compelling the country to be who it says it is. And so if folks can grow up in that sort of environment, if you are, you know, descendant from a Japanese American who was interned during World War two, or you're a woman who couldn't vote 200 years ago, or a white immigrant who 100 years ago from Ireland wasn't even considered white and was, can you know, the N-word in a different way was used for them? If all of these folks could find a way to stay here to to work in their communities, to die in war, to to lead protest movements, to compel a more inclusive, multiracial, liberal, constitutional democratic republic, then I think it's okay if we tell the truth about our origin and not paper over it with, with, you know, fables and mythologies.

NOAM: It's interesting because I think, another response to this whole conversation we're having is to just be like, “let's not celebrate the 250th.”

TED: Yeah.

NOAM: Right? There's so many shameful aspects here, and it's next to impossible to bake this into a celebration to make something like this reflective. What would you say to someone who's just like, I don't think we should commemorate this. We shouldn't celebrate a country that had this many flaws baked in from the start.

TED: Yeah, well, you know, we could run down the list of federal holidays, and I can tell you why. Each one probably isn't perfect. Okay? I mean, even Juneteenth is is celebrating the fact that years after the Emancipation Proclamation, Black people in Texas finally find out they're not enslaved anymore. And that's a celebration. It is a reason to celebrate the end of slavery, but why are we celebrating that date when it's basically the last people to be enslaved got the word too late? Memorial day is about servicemembers that have died in service of the country. But a lot of those service members weren't brought home with honors, weren't buried with honors. Their families didn't get survivor's benefits, the pensions, etc.. So why are we serving Memorial Day, when the country hasn't lived up to its promise to all of those who have served since the beginning? Holidays are political, period.

<SCORING IN> Lonely shuttle

TED: They become what we make them. And if we want to honor those who have died for the country and we should, then the holiday is what we make it. Not a, sort of cosigning on all the nation has done since its founding and or beforehand.

SCORING BUMP

TED: So celebrating the country at 250 is not an endorsement of every action the nation has taken since its founding. In my view, it's a it's a commemoration of the growth, the evolution, the progress the nation has made since its inception. And that is to be celebrated because that is celebrating the work of Americans, not celebrating a nation that's without fault.

NOAM: That was New America’s Ted Johnson. This episode was produced by Peter Balonon-Rosen and Haleema Shah, edited by Matt Collette, fact-checked by Laura Bullard, and engineered by Patrick Boyd. I’m Noam Hassenfeld and this is Today, Explained.

<SCORING OUT> Lonely shuttle

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]