

Remonstrance

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Thomas Jefferson composed his own epitaph. The inscription on his tomb identifies him as, among other things, the author of the "Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom." Virginians take pride in their commonwealth's contribution to religious liberty. Few of them would recognize the Flushing Remonstrance, however.

Last year America celebrated the 400th anniversary of Jamestown. The year also marked the 350th anniversary of a "fragile, scorched, and little-known document" that historian Kenneth Jackson describes as the first formal assertion of religious tolerance in the Colonies destined to form the United States. Jefferson composed the Virginia Statute in 1779. The General Assembly adopted it in 1786. On Dec. 27, 1657, 30 citizens in Flushing signed a petition to protest Peter Stuyvesant's persecution of Quakers in New Amsterdam. Proud of a tradition of tolerance not only in their colony but in Holland, the signatories reaffirmed their town charter's commitment to liberty of conscience.

They offered sanctuary to Quakers, and were jailed for doing so. Quakers continued to assemble in Flushing, nevertheless; after being exiled by an unfriendly Stuyvesant for holding services in his house, John Browne argued his case in the Netherlands -- and won. As Jackson notes in a New York Times column, in 1663 the Dutch West India Company labeled Quakerism an "abominable religion" but still directed Stuyvesant to "allow everyone to have his own belief."

The Virginia Statute remains a more specific act of legal disestablishment. The Council for America's First Freedom is based in Richmond for a reason. The Flushing Remonstrance suggests the attitudes nurturing religious liberty have deep roots, too. Jefferson and other like-minded Founders were visionaries. They also reflected sentiments shared by a significant portion of the citizenry, sentiments that had informed the American mind for many years. Liberty grew from fertile soil.

From its beginnings as New Amsterdam, New York has had a reputation as a polyglot metropolis. Wall Street, Rockefeller Center, the Empire State Building, and other sites symbolize New York's commercial might. The city boasts sacred corners as well -- churches and temples and synagogues. Brooklyn's Plymouth Church and Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church tell significant stories, to name but two of many edifices. Browne's house in Flushing still stands, Jackson explains, in a neighborhood with a Quaker meeting house, a Dutch Reformed church, an Episcopal church, a Catholic church, a synagogue, a Hindu temple, and a mosque. The present and the past make New York a destination not only for tourists, deal-makers, culture vultures, and pseuds, but for pilgrims -- and for all who cherish American history and the evolution of American ideals.

During a holiday trip to New York, Todd Culbertson, editor of The Times-Dispatch's Editorial Pages, attended Christmas Day services at Trinity Church, an Episcopal parish

whose sanctuary anchors Wall Street. Alexander Hamilton lies in the churchyard cemetery. Culbertson encountered at Trinity the most diverse congregation he has seen in a mainline setting. The spirit proved as lovely as the stained-glass surroundings. This was diversity as it should be. To paraphrase the title of an anthology of religious writings co-edited by the archbishop of Canterbury, love's work redeems. The Flushing Remonstrance and the Virginia Statute represent flawed humanity's redemptive gifts.

*\*\* No writer named*