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TEACHER BACKGROUND – THE FLUSHING REMONSTRANCE

Draft Edition

In a quiet community of Vlissengen (Flushing), Queens, where as now, diversity of religion, nationality and ethnicity is an accepted and welcomed custom, one of the least researched or discussed documents was written. It was the first statement of religious freedom for all faiths in the Americas and the precursor to the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. Russell Shorto in his 2004 book, title, about Dutch Manhattan stated that this document is “one of the foundational documents of American Liberty.”

On the cold winter night of December 27, 1657 at the home of town blacksmith Michael Milner, a group of people gathered. Among them was Flushing Sheriff Tobias Feake, William Thorne Senior the founding father of Flushing, and his son William Junior. Town Clerk, Edward Hart, wrote the Flushing Remonstrance this night. It was signed by 31 men and sent to Governor-Director Petrus Stuyvesant the next day.

The seeds of this document can be traced to the effects of the all encompassing reformation movement, the political power struggle in Europe and its impact on the Dutch Republic. In an effort to unite against the Spanish “oppressors,” seven Dutch provinces merged together and signed a military alliance in 1579, known as the Union of Utrecht. The document had two clauses referring to religious freedom. These are believed to be the first statements ever documented about an individual’s right to follow their conscience.

The movement toward religious toleration was primarily economic. In the early part of the seventeenth century the States-General (governing body of the Dutch Republic) was dominated by the Dutch Reformed Church and the Calvinists. They enacted laws to solidify the influence of the Dutch Reformed Church and make Calvinism the state religion. They tried to eliminate all religious dissent. For all their efforts the Dutch Reformed Church could not convince local authorities to enforce the religious edicts of the States-General. The Dutch history of strong local government dates back to the Middle Ages. Merchant classes controlled local government policy. Due in part to statements in the Union of Utrecht many people of diverse religions had been drawn to their country. Because of this vastly increased trade and profits, the local merchants generally overlooked religious differences.

Seeing that their dream of religious dominance would not occur in the Dutch Republic, the States-General and Calvinists resolved to develop a Calvinist society across the ocean in New Netherland. The Calvinist controlled government in 1621 resolved to establish colonies formed the Dutch West India Company. However, few Calvinists were willing to leave their comfortable homes and cross the ocean. As a result, many Non-Dutch immigrants settled the area of New Netherland. The Dutch West India Company appointed several Director Generals to supervise and establish control over the developing community. After problems of corruption among many of the Directors, The Dutch West India Company appointed William Kieft. In an effort to encourage settlement, he wrote The Charter of 1645. This document allowed the English settlers in the area including and surrounding Flushing to establish their own town government and granted freedom of conscience or faith. However, his insatiable greed led to a war with the Mohawks that prevented the growth of the Colony. After several battles and complications with the Native Americans, he was removed from the position and replaced with a man who was committed to the idea of a Calvinist refuge. They selected Petrus Stuyvesant, a well trained and experienced military hero. He was a devout Calvinist and immediately began to issue decrees that reinforced the Calvinist beliefs.

Flushing (Flushing) was settled in 1645 when William Thorne, Michael Milner and Edward Hart sought and received a charter from William Kieft to live in the area. The Charter stated, "... To have the liberty of conscience... without molestation or disturbance, from any magistrate or any other ecclesiastical Minister, that may pretend jurisdiction over them." However, this did not guarantee religious freedom since the people in the colony were required to belong to the Dutch Reformed Church. Kieft ignored this requirement to advance his interests. Enter Petrus Stuyvesant in 1647 and his zeal to enforce the letter of the law.

Disapproval of Stuyvesant's policies began almost immediately and long before the Quakers arrived on the scene. There were protests in 1648 and 1653 over the policy requiring only members of the Dutch Reformed Church to act as representatives of a settlement. Englishmen from Massachusetts who did not practice Calvinism and did not speak Dutch settled Flushing. They also protested the policy requiring every settlement to pay for the upkeep of a Dutch Reformed Minister. They refused to pay for the minister and were brought before Petrus Stuyvesant and his council and were fined. In 1655 the minister left Flushing for a community in Virginia.

The first documented encounter with the Quakers was August 7, 1657 when the trading ship *Woodhouse* arrived in New Amsterdam. Once Stuyvesant realized Quakers were aboard, the ship and its passengers had to leave. Unbeknownst to the authorities, eleven Quakers remained behind. Some were captured and forced to leave the colony. However, Quaker Robert Hodgson was arrested and tortured and later banished. Word of his treatment spread all over the colony. In addition, any colonist that gave room and board to Quakers was to be immediately arrested. Any ships coming into port that had Quaker passengers would be confiscated and its passengers returned to the country of origin. These policies and other decrees which tried to limit religious freedom formed the background for the meeting on December 27, 1657. Tobias Feakes delivered the Remonstrance to Governor Stuyvesant on December 28..

You have been pleased to send unto us a certain prohibition or command that we should not receive or entertain any of those people called Quakers because they are supposed to be, by some, seducers of the people.

...Wee desire therefore in this case not to judge least we be judged, neither to condemn least we be condemned, but rather let every man stand or fall to his own Master. Wee are bounde by the law to do good unto all men, especially to those of the household of faith.

...The law of love, peace and liberty in the states extending to Jews, Turks and Egyptians, as they are considered sons of Adam, which is the glory of the outward state of Holland, soe love, peace and liberty, extending to all in Christ Jesus, condemns hatred, war and bondage.

...our desire is not to offend one of his little ones, in whatsoever form, name or title hee appears in, whether Presbyterian, Independent, Baptist or Quaker,

...Therefore if any of these said persons come in love unto us, we cannot in conscience lay violent hands upon them, but give them free egress and regress unto our Town,

...And this is according to the patent and charter of our Towne, given unto us in the name of the States General, which we are not willing to infringe, and violate,...

The document was presented to Stuyvesant on December 30, 1657. He promptly ordered the arrest of four men and kept them in jail until they recanted and paid a fine. In the years following the Remonstrance the people of Flushing continued to defy the degrees of the council. Many people in the

area left for other settlements further east. However the people of Flushing stayed and continued their quiet protests.

In 1662 Stuyvesant received information that John Bowne, a Flushing resident, allowed Quakers to meet at his house. Bowne had moved to Flushing and converted to Quakerism sometime after 1657. He was arrested and found guilty of offering comfort to Quakers and holding meetings. He was fined and threatened with banishment if he continued his practices. He refused to pay the fine and remained in jail for four months. He was again brought before Stuyvesant and the council. He continued to be defiant and was placed on the first ship returning to the province of Holland with a letter to the Dutch West India Company. In March of 1663 Bowne went before the Amsterdam Chamber of the Dutch West India Company. After much debate and conflicting interests the Council reached a decision in April.

... We doubt very much whether we can proceed against them without diminishing the population and stopping immigration which must be favored at so tender a stage of the country's existence. You may therefore shut your eyes but allow everyone to have his own belief, as long as he behaves quietly and legally, gives no offence to his neighbors and does not oppose the government.

Stuyvesant was instructed to practice moderation in an effort to build the colony. One year later ownership of the Colony was passed to England. The Remonstrance and trial of Bowne set a standard for religious freedom. It can be seen in the agreement to cede New Netherland to the English. In the “Articles of Capitulation on the Reduction of New Netherland” in 1664, the eighth clause guarantees religious freedom to the inhabitants.

Although not the first statement of religious freedom in the colonies, the Remonstrance was the first statement to request religious freedom for all people to follow their conscience regardless of their religion.¹

As a culminating field trip we urge you to bring your class to see the original Flushing Remonstrance while on display at the Queens Museum of Art from April 6, 2008 to June 29, 2008.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This Resource guide was developed by teachers for teachers. We have written lessons using and adapting documents from the time period. Interactive learning and using primary sources were a priority in developing the lessons. Lessons are written to provide teachers with a variety of documents and activities on different levels so as to meet the needs of all the students in your classroom. The lessons integrate writing and literacy skills to reinforce learnings needed on State exams in literacy, writing and social studies. The lessons meet or exceed the New York State literacy, writing and Social Studies standards.

The lessons are divided into units. Each unit has at least three lessons, on different ability and grade levels with diverse activities. There are 8 units discussing various aspects of Dutch history, life in New Netherlands, Native Americans, events and people leading up to the writing of the Remonstrance and its short and long term effects. Activities from different lessons within a unit can be used to meet your classroom needs.

¹ . Adapted from “Designed for the Good of All, The Flushing Remonstrance and Religious Freedom in America”, by Tabettha Garman, August, 2006. Thesis presented to the faculty of the Department of History, East Tennessee State University.

Timeline of major events leading to the Flushing Remonstrance and its effects.

DATE	DOCUMENT/EVENT	HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE
1215	Magna Carta signed by King John of England	Early protection of the rights of noblemen against the power of the King. Declared that the King must obey the laws of the land.
1576 (Nov. 8)	The Pacification of Ghent (Netherlands)	A Declaration of the northern and southern provinces of the Low Countries setting aside religious differences to unite against Spanish rule. It was the first major expression of the Netherlands' desire for nationhood.
1579	Union of Utrecht	Set a precedent for religious freedom in the Netherlands, and created an atmosphere of tolerance. People of all backgrounds could practice their faith freely and without fear of persecution.
1645	Charter	Dutch West India Company provided for the creation of a Dutch settlement in what is now Flushing. Settlers to have the rights of citizens of Holland including Freedom of conscience.
1647	Peter Stuyvesant appointed Director General of New Amsterdam	Dutch West India Company appoints Stuyvesant to replace William Kieft as Director General. His mission was to bring order to New Amsterdam.
1653	Protests over Stuyvesant's policies.	Colonists protest Stuyvesant's policy that stated that only members of the Dutch reformed Church could act as representatives of a settlement.
1657 (December 27)	Flushing Remonstrance	In protest of the policies discriminating Quakers and other religions, the Flushing Remonstrance was written and signed then presented to Stuyvesant.
1658 (January 21)	Proclamation of the Day of Prayer	To be observed March 13, 1658 – an edict mandating a day of prayer for all people of New Amsterdam. It also condemned the Quakers.
1662	John Bowne hosts Quaker meetings in his home.	Stuyvesant punishes Bowne by fining him and placing him in jail. Bowne's continued defiance led to his being banished from New Amsterdam.
1663	Bowne pleads his case before the Amsterdam Chamber of the Dutch West India Company.	Dutch West India Company exonerates Bowne and orders Stuyvesant to practice moderation towards all religions.
1683	Colony Of New York Charter Of Liberties	Everyone who lives in this colony may practice whatever religion they want openly and happily
1777	New York State Constitution	Guarantees freedom of religion within the state.
1779	Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom	Written by Thomas Jefferson in the belief that all people should be guaranteed the right to religious freedom.
1787	Virginia Statue for Religious Freedom enacted into State law.	The Virginia State Assembly by adopting this law guarantees the right of religious freedom throughout the state.
1789	Constitutional Convention	The United States Constitution.
1791	Bill of Rights enacted	The first ten Amendments to the Constitution of the United States protect individual freedoms of its citizens. The first Amendment protects freedom of religion throughout the United States.