

# 350th Anniversary of the Flushing Remonstrance: A celebration of a document and the principles it embodies

New York began as the Dutch colony of New Netherland in 1624, when it was governed by a series of Directors who were appointed by the Dutch West India Company and operated under Dutch and local law. Peter Stuyvesant became Director General in 1647, and one of his goals was to establish a strong, cohesive society. He strongly believed at the time that full acceptance of many religions would put a society at great risk. The "Society of Friends" or Quakers were among the most radical religious sects at the time. Some Quakers welcomed public confrontation, disrupted religious services and sought persecution and martyrdom.

It was in this environment, in 1657, that Director General Stuyvesant issued a proclamation which severely limited the rights of Quakers to worship freely within his colony. Those who allowed Quakers to worship in their homes were fined, and any ships carrying Quakers were to be turned away. Residents of the predominantly English town of Flushing were unhappy with the proclamation. They saw it as an infringement of their "Liberty of Conscience" which had been promised to them in a 1645 patent establishing the town. In response, the residents of Flushing prepared a remonstrance that protested Stuyvesant's actions and asserted their right to religious freedom. Stuyvesant rejected the remonstrance; the constable who brought it to the council was arrested. Despite Stuyvesant's continued persecution of Quakers and signers of the petition, Quakerism and the desire for freedom of religious expression continued to spread. Five years later, a Quaker settler John Bowne, openly defied the ban and allowed



Petrus (Peter) Stuyvesant  
Courtesy of the New York State Archives

Quakers to hold services in his home. He was imprisoned and refusing to pay a fine or plead guilty, Stuyvesant sent him to Holland. There he argued his case successfully before the administration of the Dutch West India Company, which then sent a letter rebuking Stuyvesant, saying that he should "not force people's consciences, but allow every one to have his own belief"-effectively ending the persecution of Quakers and other religious minorities in the colony.

Stuyvesant surrendered the colony of New Netherland to an English fleet in 1664. Laws were issued for the new colony of New York in 1665, under authority of the charter issued by the Duke of York by his brother, King Charles II. The "Duke's Laws" gave the Anglican and Dutch Reformed churches official status, but declared that no Christians should be "molested, fined, or imprisoned for differing in judgment in matters of religion." Thus the legacy of the Flushing Remonstrance continued.

It has been argued that the Flushing Remonstrance is a forerunner of the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights. Whether the framers of the U.S. Constitution had knowledge of this document is not certain. However, the remonstrance quotes the Dutch charter to the town of Flushing and the "fundamental law of Holland" in its appeal to the director general. The Dutch republic was admired by American revolutionaries. The Dutch declaration of independence (1581 Act of Abjuration) and constitution (Union of Utrecht) may have served as examples for the American founding fathers.

The Flushing Remonstrance can best be understood within the context of its time, but it embodied principles of liberty of conscience and freedom of religion that are now considered basic human and civil rights.

## About the document:

The text and signatures on the original document were evidently copied and incorporated into the minutes of the Dutch Colonial Council and were maintained in the secretary's office. What happened to the original petition is unknown. The signatures on the copy of the remonstrance in the minutes appear to be in the same handwriting, a clear indication that the document is a contemporary copy, not the original.

The Dutch Colonial Council minutes and other records of the New Netherland government were transferred to the new British government in 1664. Ultimately, the Flushing Remonstrance along with all the Dutch records were transferred to the New York State Library in 1881 and again to the New York State Archives in 1978. The Dutch records have been in continuous custody of the government of New York since 1664.

The photo at left is the front of the first page of the Flushing Remonstrance. It was damaged along with other government documents in a fire in 1911.

The text at right is a transcript of the Flushing Remonstrance in the original old-style spelling.

For more detailed information on the Flushing Remonstrance [www.flushingremonstrance.info](http://www.flushingremonstrance.info)  
For more on the historic documents of New York State go to [www.nysarchives.org](http://www.nysarchives.org)

**re-mo-n-strance**  
(ri-mon'strəns)  
noun - An expression of protest, complaint, or reproof, especially a formal statement of grievances.



## Remonstrance of the Inhabitants of the Town of Flushing to Governor Stuyvesant, December 27, 1657

Right Honorable

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. For our part we cannot condemn them in this case, neither can we stretch out our hands against them, for out of Christ God is a consuming fire, and it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

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. And though for the present we seem to be unsensible for the law and the Law giver, yet when death and the Law assault us, if wee have our advocate to seeke, who shall plead for us in this case of conscience betwixt God and our own souls; the powers of this world can neither attach us, neither excuse us, for if God justifie who can condemn and if God condemn there is none can justifie.

And for those jealousies and suspicions which some have of them, that they are destructive unto Magistracy and Ministrye, that cannot bee, for the Magistrate hath his sword in his hand and the Minister hath the sword in his hand, as witness those two great examples, which all Magistrates and Ministers are to follow, Moses and Christ, whom God raised up maintained and defended against all enemies both of flesh and spirit; and therefore that of God will stand, and that which is of man will come to nothing. And as the Lord hath taught Moses or the civil power to give an outward liberty in the state, by the law written in his heart designed for the good of all, and can truly judge who is good, who is evil, who is true and who is false, and can pass definitive sentence of life or death against that man which arises up against the fundamental law of the States General; soe he hath made his ministers a savor of life unto life and a savor of death unto death.

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. And because our Saviour sayeth it is impossible but that offences will come, but woe unto him by whom they cometh, 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, but shall be glad to see anything of God in any of them, desiring to doe unto all men as we desire all men should doe unto us, which is the true law both of Church and State; for our Saviour sayeth this is the law and the prophets.

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 houses, as God shall persuade our consciences, for we are bounde by the law of God and man to doe good unto all men and evil to noe man. 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, but shall houlde to our patent and shall remaine, your humble subjects, the inhabitants of Vlishing.

Written this 27th of December in the year 1657, by mee.

*Edward Hart, Clericus*

### Additional Signers

*Tobias Feake*

*The marke of William Noble*

*William Thorne, Seignior*

*The marke of William Thorne, Jr.*

*Edward Tarne*

*John Store*

*Nathaniel Hefferd*

*Benjamin Hubbard*

*The marke of William Pidgion*

*The marke of George Clere*

*Elias Doughtie*

*Antonie Feild*

*Richard Stocton*

*John Mastine*

*John Townesend*

*Nathaniell Tue*

*Nicholas Blackford*

*The marke of Micah Tue*

*The marke of Philip Ud*

*Robert Field, senior*

*Robert Field, junior*

*Nich Colas Parsell*

*Michael Milner*

*Henry Townsend*

*George Wright*

*John Foad*

*Henry Semtell*

*Edward Griffine*

*Edward Farrington*

## Newspaper Tie-ins to Today

◆ As modern Americans, we may take freedom of religion for granted but we are not without religious conflict. Search recent editions of the newspaper for any example of conflict that involves religious freedom. Divide the class into as many groups as you see represented within the article and an extra to serve as the mediator group. Each group is to argue their group's position based on the information presented in the article and additional sources. The mediator group is to help these conflicting groups reach a reasonable resolution of the conflict keeping in mind the religious freedom guarantees of the U.S. Constitution First Amendment.

◆ The U. S. Constitution prohibits laws that put state (government) power behind any particular religion or entangle the state with religious activities. It guarantees not only freedom of religion, but also freedom from religion. Examples of the separation clause are prayer in school, displays of the Ten Commandments in government offices and even school or town holiday celebrations with religious themes or symbols. Look for articles in your newspaper about the separation issue. Each student should write in the style of newspaper editorial expressing their opinion on one of these issues. Be sure to support opinions with facts.

◆ The people of Flushing petitioned their government to address an issue and correct an injustice they felt strongly about. It took time but they ultimately achieved their goal - religious freedom. Look through recent editions of the newspaper for issues you feel strongly about. As a class, select one of these problems and draft your own remonstrance. Be sure to have everyone who supports this view sign their name to it. Is this a local, state or national issue? Research where your document would be "delivered."

◆ People make their voices known in our government directly such as in congressional hearings, and indirectly through letters to their representatives in Congress. Other indirect methods to influence change include the use of newspapers and other media. Letters to the editor, political cartoons, press releases and even newspaper advertising are all vehicles used to sway public opinion and potential voters. Each student should select one of the newspaper methods listed and create a persuasive argument based on a local issue in the news. Be sure to use facts to strengthen their point of view.

Newspaper Logo - NIE contact information  
and local sponsor acknowledgement

