

Law Day 2013

Religious Freedom

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

re·mon·strance

[rĭ-mōn'strens]

noun - An expression of protest, complaint, or reproof, especially a formal statement of grievances.

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. 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. Although initially rejected by Stuyvesant, the Dutch West India Company, ultimately 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.

New York maintained a high degree of religious diversity and tolerance throughout the colonial period. When New York adopted its Constitution in 1777 it included the “free exercise clause” stating: *... the free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship, without discrimination or preference, shall forever hereafter be allowed, within this State, to all mankind: Provided, That the liberty of conscience, hereby granted, shall not be so construed as to excuse acts of licentiousness, or justify practices inconsistent with the peace or safety of this State.*

Thus religious freedom was part of New York’s protection even before the inclusion of the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights.

Student Assessment:

Complete this statement:
I was surprised to learn...

Next installment: Women’s Suffrage

Newspaper Activity:

Persuasive Writing

People make their voices known in our government directly such as in congressional hearings, and indirectly through letters to their representatives. Other indirect methods include the use of newspapers and other media. Letters to the editor, political cartoons, press releases and even newspaper advertising are vehicles used to sway others. 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.