

This Day in History... December 27, 1657

Flushing Remonstrance

On December 27, 1657, a group of 30 people in Vlissing, New Netherland, signed the Flushing Remonstrance, a plea for religious freedom.

Vlissingen or Vlissing (present-day Flushing in Queens, New York) was settled in the Dutch colony of New Netherland in 1645. The colony's governor, Willem Kieft, granted the English settlers there the same religious freedoms as Holland, which was one of the most religiously tolerant European countries.

However, major changes soon set in, in large part due to the situation in the Netherlands at the time. Back in the Netherlands, they were revolting against Spanish rule and an inquisition, striving toward establishing a national identity, and working to unite the Calvinist and Catholic provinces. So in 1656, Governor Peter Stuyvesant issued an ordinance outlawing the practice of all religions outside of the Dutch Reformed Church in the colony. Those caught practicing other religions or holding now-illegal meetings would be arrested.

Vlissingen (present-day Flushing), Rustdorp (present-day Jamaica, Queens), and 's-Gravesend (present-day Gravesend, Brooklyn) were all home to Quaker missions and the people there were upset by the new law. However, there were also those that supported the law and informed on people practicing other religions.

In response to the law, a group of 30 English citizens met and composed the Flushing Remonstrance on December 27, 1657. While they were not Quakers themselves, they were upset by how the Quakers had been persecuted.

Their statement concluded: "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 Vlissing."

When Stuyvesant received their petition, he removed the members of the local government and replaced them with new Dutch leaders. Four of the document's signers were arrested. While two of them recanted, the other two stood firm and were jailed for over a month.

Over time, a man was exiled for performing Christian baptisms, while another was arrested for preaching Quakerism, and another still was banished for holding Quaker meetings. In response to these and similar acts, Stuyvesant sent magistrates and soldiers to educate those that didn't follow the law. In some cases, soldiers entered and remained in people's homes until they agreed to comply.

In support of the remonstrance, John Bowne invited Quakers to meet at his home, but when Stuyvesant learned of this, he had him arrested and banished to Holland. An Englishman, Bowne didn't speak Dutch and struggled to survive there. He eventually met with the owners of the Dutch West India Company, who ultimately told Stuyvesant in 1663 to end his religious persecution.

The Flushing Remonstrance is often seen as an early benchmark in religious freedom in America and a precursor to the First Amendment's guarantee of Freedom of Religion.



Stamp issued on the 300th anniversary of the Flushing Remonstrance.



Stamp commemorates the founding of the first volunteer fire department in America by Peter Stuyvesant.



Stamp issued for the 175th anniversary of the Bill of Rights.

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