

The following is the Keynote Address given by Robert Kravetz on January 16, 2005 at the Religious Freedom Day commemoration.

A short time before his death, and fearing he would be unable to attend the ceremony, Thomas Jefferson wrote a memorial for the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of American Independence, that we could well repeat today: **“For ourselves, let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollection of the rights, and an undiminished devotion to them.”**

We are here to celebrate the 228th anniversary of Jefferson’s Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom. The columnist Jim Hoagland called religious freedom a dividing line in open societies between religion and politics, a line that shifts to reflect changing moral and material conditions, bringing choices – and with them, consequences. Does a day go by without articles and letters in our newspapers about spiritual matters, announcements of religious events, and **robust** and free discussion in the media about matters of religion? Religion plays an **eternal part** in human history. Freedom of religion and tolerant civil society go hand in hand. In honor of this freedom, we gather as neighbors, in friendship and openness, with respect for one another, and - to quote my friend, Bill McCarthy - **“to say Thank you, Mr. Jefferson.”**

Imagine it is 1777. **This** is the very week when Jefferson and the other four House of Delegates appointees, who had agreed to meet in Fredericksburg, undertook **“to settle the plan of operation and distribute the work of revising the laws of Virginia,”** Revising the laws of Virginia – to make them **suitable** for the new republic. What an enormous task! Jefferson was from Albemarle County, Edmund Pendleton from Caroline, George Wythe from Williamsburg, Thomas Ludwell Lee from Westmoreland, and George Mason from Fairfax, so Weedon’s Tavern, at Caroline and William Streets, was a fine central location. You have probably walked or driven by it downtown, where the Antique Court of Shoppes is. Jefferson was 33, **much** younger than the other four, whose average age was over 50. They met from Monday, through Friday, January 13th to 17th. Remember that just six months earlier, July 4, 1776, was the Declaration of Independence. The U.S. population was barely **one percent** of today. **Religious taxes, and laws favorable to the Church of England**, had long been in place. It is hard for us **living today** to believe that, only nine years earlier, in 1768, Pastors Lewis Craig, John Waller, and James Chiles had been **arrested and jailed** in Fredericksburg for preaching the Baptist Gospel. **Take a look** at the plaque downtown, on the Fredericksburg Baptist Church. During mid- and late-1776, the Virginia legislature had been **inundated** with petitions from minority religious bodies throughout Virginia, trying to gain equal legal status. Jefferson would later recall, **“the petitions to abolish this spiritual tyranny brought on the severest contests in which I have ever been engaged.”** Even Patrick Henry, the great orator of liberty, would be against the bill, but he was a **staunch** supporter of the Church of England, and he was certain that a strong church was **necessary** to ensure a civil republic.

By this time in 1777, **already** 60 of over 400 battles and skirmishes of the war had taken place. It **started**, with Lexington & Concord, and would **finish**, five years later, in Yorktown. The 2nd and 7th Virginia regiments were rendezvousing in Fredericksburg on their way to join Washington at the front. Sunday – today, the day before they met – Hugh Mercer would die from wounds received at the Battle of Princeton, nine days earlier. Mrs. Mercer had just given birth to a son, who would never meet his father. And there were many such stories. Mercer’s **apothecary** shop was downtown at Caroline and Amelia Streets. **You** can see Mercer’s memorial statue from here, 150 yards behind me. That was the moment it was, in Fredericksburg’s history.

The revisors met and divided the responsibilities for the laws between themselves. George Mason, from Fairfax, soon excused himself, saying he lacked legal training. Thomas Ludwell Lee, from Westmoreland, was to die of rheumatic fever the next year. The work ultimately was to fall to the remaining three. Jefferson felt strongly about religious freedom and likely took that responsibility for himself, along with the criminal laws, the laws of inheritance, and education, which you know he promoted widely. By Jefferson’s own account, he completed the Bill sometime during 1777, recalling later, **“The bill for establishing religious freedom, the principles of which had, to a certain degree, been enacted before, I had drawn in all the latitude of reason & right.”**

Today, January 16 – it so happens – is also the anniversary of that Monday **exactly** nine years later, when Jefferson’s bill was **enacted into law**, in Richmond, thanks in large part to efforts by James Madison. Let’s fast-forward to December, **1785**. The House had voted in favor, 78-20, then the Senate voted 8-10, against. Finally, after continued negotiation, a second House vote was 56-35 in favor. Jefferson’s Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, was enacted into law as the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom on January 16, 1786. Today, at 14th and Cary Street, where the Capitol once stood, the enactment clause, which you see on the banner carried by the marchers, is written in print **large enough** to cover the entire side of a downtown building. Take a look at it when you next visit Richmond. Our Fredericksburg celebration today lifts up the beginning, and the Richmond celebration today lifts up the conclusion of that nine year process, the outcome of which was never certain. John Adams said of that period, that **the rest of the country was watching, to see how Virginia would resolve the issue of religious freedom**. Jefferson’s Statute **remains today**, in the Code of Virginia.

In 1992, in recognition of Jefferson’s Statute for Religious Freedom, Governor Wilder designated January 16 as **Virginia** Religious Freedom Day. In 1993, President Bush senior designated January 16 as **National** Religious Freedom Day. To quote my bride, Cathy, **“I don’t think anyone would argue that today is Religious Freedom Day.”**

Freedom House, in Washington, D.C., was established in by Eleanor Roosevelt and Wendell Willke in 1941, to study and promote human liberties. Recently they reported that the United States is one of **only six countries** in the world that have what they consider the highest measures of religious freedom. The other five, Finland, Norway, Netherlands, Estonia, and Eire (Ireland), have in total barely one tenth our population and land area. It is reasonable to say that Virginia is the cradle, and our country an important guardian, of religious freedom.

Jefferson died on July 4, 1824, on the very day of the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. He had already penned the words he wanted on his tombstone at Monticello, **“Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, The author of the Declaration of American Independence, of The Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia.”** When the Jefferson Memorial opened in Washington D.C. in 1943, parts of Jefferson’s Bill were inscribed on the wall of the Memorial. Years later, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy recognized Jefferson’s lifetime accomplishments, when he told a gathering of American Nobel laureates that they were the greatest assemblage of talent in the White House **since Jefferson had dined there alone.**

Some believe that Jefferson’s Bill is the finest and most far-reaching prose that the Western Hemisphere has contributed to our language, the Mona Lisa of the American pen. Perhaps freedom of belief is the foundation of all freedom. Perhaps that is why the **very** first words of the Bill of Rights are: **“Congress shall make no law regarding an establishment of religion, or the practice thereof ...”** Perhaps never before the **recent earthquake and tsunami in South Asia**, have faiths come together more selflessly to help our fellow men and women. Perhaps never have people needed, more than today, the freedom to seek, and to find, comfort, strength, and courage in their many different faiths and beliefs. In my humble effort to lift Jefferson’s spirit before you, let me share with you the words of Jefferson’s Bill.

It is almost 800 words long, the length of a newspaper editorial. It starts with a preamble, fully three quarters of the document, rather more like a declaration than a law. In it, Jefferson lists fourteen premises upon which he felt religious freedom was based. Before the law would pass, the legislature would drop, reinstate, and finally shorten the preamble by 49 of its 600 words (**“mutilations”, Jefferson called them.**) The second, enactment clause and the third, admonitory clause – admonishing future readers to condone no changes – **would remain just as Jefferson had written them in 1777.** In his autobiography, Jefferson wrote that the modesty of the changes made by the Virginia legislature **“were proof that they meant to comprehend, within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo, and infidel of every denomination.”** In the preamble, each of Jefferson’s fourteen premises are signaled by the word “that”.

The enactment clause begins with the words “**The General Assembly do enact** ...”

(Robert then recited the statute from memory)