

# The Importance of Flushing

BY RUSSELL SHORTO

Seventeenth-century settlers in Flushing drafted a protest that became a watershed of religious freedom in the New World and “one reason why New York became New York.”

Considering its significance—considering how foundational it is to American history, to the root idea of a free society that we all take for granted—the Flushing Remonstrance is a document that gets very little respect. It could have something to do with the name: it’s an awkward mouthful, is it not? In the first place, we must admit—and forgive us, residents of a certain city in the borough of Queens—that if “Flushing” stirs something in people, it is not especially lofty. As to “remonstrance,” it might be interesting to query your co-workers or members of your family to see how many can give you a reasonably close definition of the word. Perhaps calling it The Long Island Protest would have gotten the document bigger play over the centuries. Or something poetically in keeping with its era (only a few decades from that of Shakespeare): say, The





Complaint of Conscience.

Let's both put this remarkable piece of paper in context and outline its significance. Flushing—the city in Queens—was originally Vlissingen, after a Dutch city of that name. It was part of the Dutch colony of New Netherland, which stretched across the Middle Atlantic region of what would become the United States. New Netherland is best remembered today for its capital—New Amsterdam—which became New York City, and for its last director, Peter Stuyvesant.

The Dutch brought several things to the region they colonized. Most notable was an idea they more or less invented in the seventeenth century: “tolerance.” As everyone knows, the Dutch provinces are mostly below sea level, and this geographical fact meant that they were a relatively easy place to invade or run to. Thus, throughout the 1500s and 1600s, Europeans fleeing war or seeking freedom to think or write or worship made their way to the Low Countries. As a consequence, the major Dutch cities—Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht—became multicultural centers. The idea of tolerance developed not through lofty ideals but as a way for these disparate peoples to get along with each other. At the same time, the Dutch found that it *worked*: tolerance allowed a mixed society not only to get by but to do business, to flourish. It became one of the keys to the success of the Dutch Golden Age.

This idea got transferred to

the New World colony. One of the principles of Dutch tolerance was freedom of conscience. According to Dutch law, you couldn't be harassed because of your religious beliefs. Naturally, not everyone went along with this. In fact, a goodly portion of Dutch society thought it was exactly the wrong approach. In this, they were only following what was common belief nearly everywhere. The seventeenth century was the age of religious war, when it was almost universally held that in order for a society to be strong it had to be unified, particularly in matters of religion. Religious intolerance was thus more or less official policy in England, France, Spain, and elsewhere.

Peter Stuyvesant—the son of a Calvinist minister—was among the Dutch who were also of this mind, and to be fair he had good practical reasons for it. He was the ruler of a small, weak colony that was surrounded by would-be enemies: Indians, but most dangerously of all the English to the north and south. Unlike the English colonies, New Netherland comprised a mixture of nationalities and religions. Stuyvesant believed this weakened it, and no doubt he was right; bickering among different ethnic and religious groups was more or less constant. He tried, therefore, to keep the tolerance in check. When Jews arrived in 1654, seeking asylum, he barred them from settling. The Jews went over his head, however, appealing to the

directors of the West India Company, which administered the colony, and to the provision in Dutch law that dictated freedom of conscience. Stuyvesant was overruled, and had to allow the Jews to remain. (He managed to make their lives miserable, though, so that most eventually left.)

Then, in 1657, the issue came back in a new form. The Dutch colony had been receiving more and more English settlers, thanks in large part to the fact that the Puritan rule in England (and New England) meant that those of other religious persuasions were unwelcome there. Many of these non-Puritan English pilgrims thus settled in parts of the future boroughs of New York. One such group was the Quakers, whose penchant for spirit-fueled frenzy—quaking—caused some residents discomfort. Stuyvesant in particular seems to have felt they were out of their minds; at any rate, he believed their form of religious belief was a threat to the public order, and in 1657 he barred the town of Vlissingen from allowing them to settle. In response, the English residents crafted a complaint, or remonstrance. The most memorable phrase from the Flushing Remonstrance, to my mind, is the one in which the residents appeal to “The law of love, peace and liberty in the [Dutch] states extending to Jews, Turks, and Egyptians, as they are considered the sonnes of Adam, which is the glory of the outward state of Holland...”

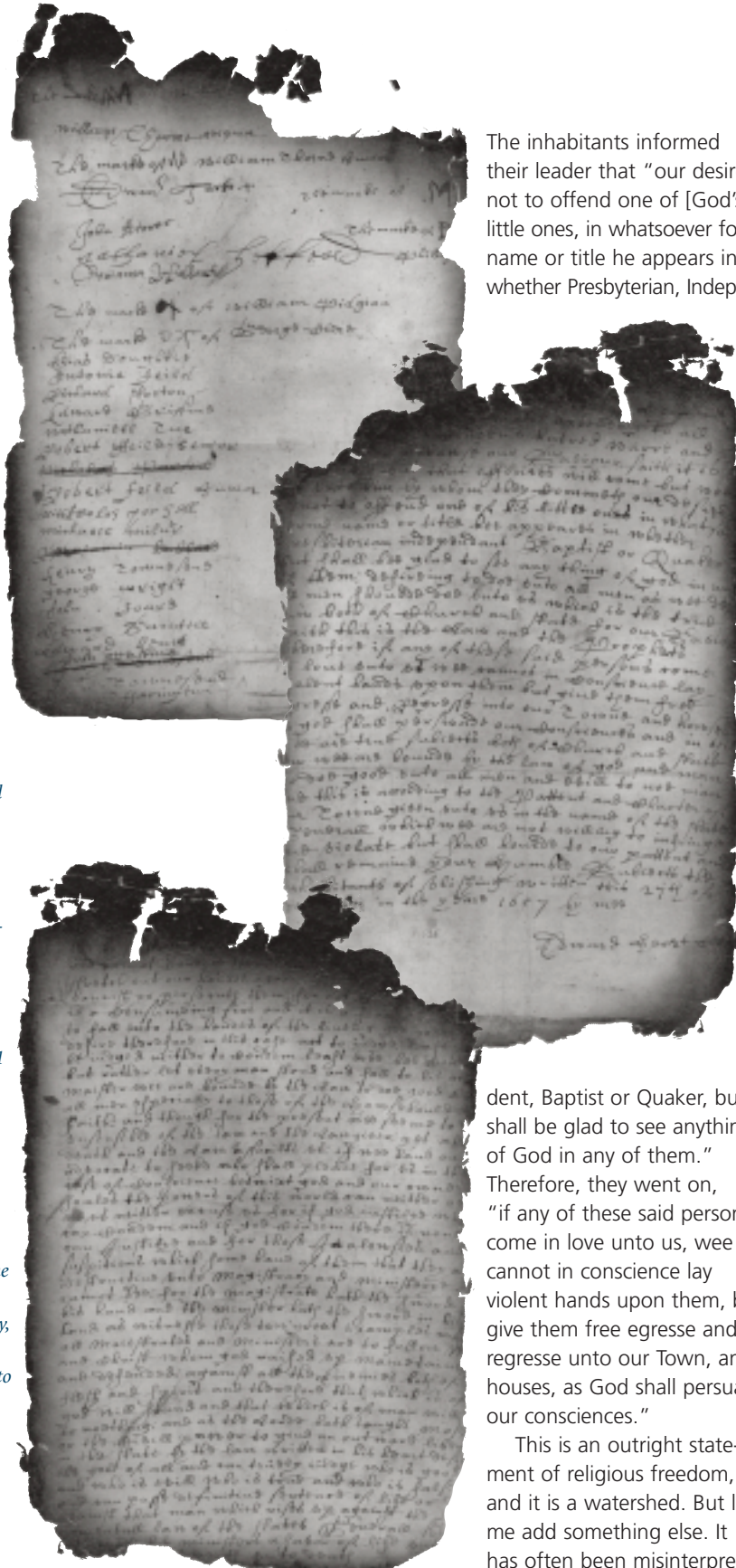
*The 350th anniversary of the Flushing Remonstrance was celebrated throughout the fall with a series of special programs and events in Queens, Manhattan, and Albany. The actual document will be on display at the Queens Library from December 5, 2007 to January 7, 2008, and at the Queens Museum of Art from April 6 to June 29, 2008.*

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Its Dutch character  
is one reason why  
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New York.

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Left: *The tip of Manhattan, 1650.*



NEW YORK STATE ARCHIVES

Both the text and the signatures of the Flushing Remonstrance were evidently copied and incorporated into the Dutch Colonial Council minutes, which were singed in the 1911 Capitol fire. The signatures on this copy of the remonstrance all appear to be in the same handwriting, a clear indication that the document is a contemporary copy, not the original. What happened to the original petition is unknown, but it may have been returned to the individual who presented it to Stuyvesant.

The inhabitants informed their leader that “our desire is not to offend one of [God’s] little ones, in whatsoever form, name or title he appears in, whether Presbyterian, Independen-

dent, Baptist or Quaker, but shall be glad to see anything of God in any of them.” Therefore, they went on, “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.”

This is an outright statement of religious freedom, and it is a watershed. But let me add something else. It has often been misinterpreted

in American history as being an English-versus-Dutch statement. That is, it has been viewed in terms of “the English believe in religious liberty, while the Dutch do not.” This is simply wrong. The context was Dutch. The laws to which the residents of Vlissingen/Flushing appealed were Dutch laws. The situation is unique to New Netherland—and thus to New York. Its Dutch character is one reason why New York grew into a vibrantly multi-ethnic culture: one reason why New York became New York. The English of New England undeniably gave us their language and many aspects of government, but they were at this time in American history very far from enunciating such an ideal of religious freedom. What we see in the Flushing Remonstrance is a fledgling American colony applying hard-won rights from the Old Country to a New World setting, where they would flourish in an entirely new way. The mixed peoples who founded New Netherland would become a wellspring of American religious liberty, and also a source of America’s notion of equality.

Many places in the world today still have state religions and bar faiths other than the approved one. When Americans want to tally the things they value most in their society, the things to be proud of and hold close, the Flushing Remonstrance—by whatever name—should be high on their list. ■





# Transcript of the Remonstrance

## REMONSTRANCE

*Of the Inhabitants of the  
Town of Flushing  
To Governor Stuyvesant*

*December 27, 1657*

*Right Honorable,*

You have been pleased to send up 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, to punish, banish or persucute 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.

We 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 and fall to his own Master. Wee are bounde by the Law to doe good unto all men, especially to those of the household of faith. And though for the present we seem to be unsensible of 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 power of this world can neither attack 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 Ministerye, that can not bee, for the magistrate hath the 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 the enemies both of flesh and spirit; and therefore that which is 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 civil, who is true and who is false, and can pass definitive sentence of life or death against that man which rises 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 the sonnes 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 saith it is impossible but that offenses 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 wee desire all men should doe unto us, which is the true law both of Church and State; for our Saviour saith 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. And in this we are true subjects both of Church and State, 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 servants, the inhabitants of Vlissing.

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

EDWARD HART, *Clericus*

*Tobias Feake*

*Nathaniel Tue*

The Mark of *William Noble*

*Nicholas Blackford*

The Mark of *Micah Tue*

*William Thorne, seignor*

The Mark of *William Thorne, junior*

The Mark of *Phillipp Ud*

*Edward Tarne*

*Robert Field, senior*

*John Store*

*Robert Field, junior*

*Nathaniel Hefferd*

*Nick Colas Parsell*

*Benjamin Hubbard*

*Michael Milner*

The Mark of *Henry Townsend*

*William Pigion*

*George Wright*

The Mark of *John Foard*

*George Clere*

*Henry Semtell*

*Elias Doughtie*

*Edward Hart*

*Antonie Feild*

*John Mastine*

*Richard Stockton*

*John Townesend*

*Edward Griffine*

*Edward Farrington*