



LIBRARY OF VIRGINIA

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Library of Virginia Exhibition Explores *First Freedom: Virginia's Statute for Religious Freedom*

~Runs April 18, 2016, through March 2, 2017~

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For Immediate Release

The tension surrounding what constitutes religious freedom resonates today just as it did in Virginia in the late 1700s. What do we mean by religious freedom? What is separation of church and state? How do you balance one person's beliefs with the common good? How have our ideas about religious freedom changed since the founding of our nation?

First Freedom: Virginia's Statute for Religious Freedom, running at the Library of Virginia from April 18, 2016, through March 2, 2017, explores these questions and more. The exhibition features the following items and topics.

Thomas Jefferson's "Act for Establishing Religious Freedom" is one of the most revolutionary pieces of legislation in American history and is justly celebrated as the "Great Charter" of conscience rights. No one familiar with today's public and political debates about religious liberty and the relationship of church and state can doubt that the statute holds lasting significance. The statute encouraged the growth of religious freedom and profoundly influenced the formulation and later interpretation of the First Amendment. But we know less about what it settled and more about what it left undecided. The arguments over the intent and interpretation of the statute included issues that are debated today.

The Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedom, adopted in 1786, made religious beliefs and practices private matters with which the state government could not interfere. No person could be excluded from any public office as a result of religious beliefs. The law did not prohibit discussion of religious beliefs in public debate about political issues. Nor did it clearly indicate whether laws to regulate certain behaviors, such as drinking and gambling, were prohibited because some people believed that their religious beliefs required them to avoid those behaviors.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1791, guarantees the free exercise of religious liberty and prohibits the federal government from establishing a religion. Interpretations of the Virginia statute influenced interpretations of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. In the 20th century, federal courts have ruled that state governments also may not restrict religious liberty or establish religion. But what kinds of government actions might restrict the free exercise of religion? What does "establishment of religion" mean? What kinds of government

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First Freedom Exhibition/Page Two

actions might be regarded as establishing religion? Did the founding generation intend for the First Amendment to serve as a wall of separation between church and state, as Thomas Jefferson wrote? What is the proper role of religion in a country with multiple religious traditions?

Among the items to be displayed in the exhibition are the Journal of the Convention of 1776, which adopted George Mason's Declaration of Rights, petitions from dissenting religious groups to the General Assembly demanding religious freedom, and petitions to the General Assembly from Jews asking for exemptions to Sunday observance laws.

Digital interactive displays will quiz visitors on the language in the statute and what Thomas Jefferson actually said about religion and will also chart the ebb and flow of the public's perception of religious freedom over the past 230 years using newspaper articles from Virginia Chronicle, the Library's database of historical Virginia newspapers. The Library invites visitors to use a comment board to share thoughts on the exhibition as well as on recent news articles related to religious freedom. The comments will be posted on the Library's Facebook page.

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March 9, 2016