As soon as the Dutch began to settle in New Netherland in 1624, the West India Company insisted that everyone be granted “freedom of conscience.” This did not necessarily include freedom to worship. The Stuyvesant administration passed an ordinance in 1656 prohibiting the practice of any religion other than the Reformed. Enforcement gave rise to friction with Quakers, resulting in the Flushing Remonstrance. Charles Gehring gives the historical background and a nuanced account of the events.

In 1657, Petrus Stuyvesant, Director General of New Netherland, jailed several officials of the mostly English village of Vlissingen [Flushing] on Long Island. Their crime was insubordination and contravention of their oaths by allowing Quakers to meet in their homes. On the surface it appears to be a clear-cut case of intolerance by an authoritarian figure and a heroic act of resistance by intrepid citizens, striking a blow for religious freedom. The remonstrance or grievance was in protest of an ordinance prohibiting the harboring of Quakers. It was written by Tobias Feake, village schout, and read aloud by Edward Hart, village clerk, for which they were jailed. The protest is based primarily on the principle of “Freedom of Conscience.” It all seems so cut and dried, as Stuyvesant had a history in these matters. Several years earlier he had recommended to the West India Company directors in Amsterdam that a group of Jews fleeing Brazil not be allowed to settle in New Netherland; while several petitions by the large Lutheran community to call a minister were denied out of hand.

In contrast, the English settlers in Vlissingen had fled religious persecution in New England hoping to enjoy the fabled religious tolerance of the Dutch. It couldn’t be more black and white. However, when put into its cultural context it may prove to be many shades of gray. You be the judge.

When Stuyvesant became director general of New Netherland in 1647, the Dutch eighty years’ revolt against the Hapsburg Empire was just drawing to a close. The Dutch of the newly independent United Provinces of the Netherlands were, in 1648, the first in history to win their freedom from a world-class empire; the next people to do so, a century and a half later, should be familiar to every American.

The Dutch revolt against the Hapsburg Empire was caused by a complex set of social, religious, political, and economic issues. In simple terms, the revolt was in reaction to two
Figure 8.1. The Flushing Remonstrance—A petition from the freeholders of Flushing and Jamaica, Long Island, to Governor Petrus Stuyvesant protesting his ban on Quaker religious meetings, 1657. New York State Archives. Dutch colonial council minutes, 1638–1665. Series A1809–78.
Figure 8.1. Continued.
Hapsburg initiatives: an attempt to establish a central control and authority in the Netherlands—
to the detriment of local privileges, and the establishment of the Inquisition to suppress the
Protestant heresy.

The cerebral issue was perceived as an attack on the ancient rights and privileges of every
political entity in the Netherlands. The emotional issue was seen as an attempt to suppress the
religious threat to the Roman church by the Reformed religion of John Calvin. Both issues
were ideal for Spain’s Philip II to pursue. Unlike his father Charles V, he had no affection for
the Netherlands. He viewed these Northern provinces merely as fatted cows to be exploited.
A centrally controlled Netherlands was to provide economic and human resources for Philip’s
political agenda. As a devout Catholic he viewed the Reformed movement in the North as a
disease that had to be stamped out before it spread. Philip’s inability to deal compassionately
with these forces in the Netherlands and his inability to view the Dutch as anything but hostile
heretics, led to the establishment of a new country, the United Provinces of the Netherlands.

Because of the brutality of the Spanish Inquisition’s attempt to suppress the inexorable
spread of the Reformed religion, the principle of tolerance was written into the 1579 Union
of Utrecht—a defensive treaty among the northern provinces, which would serve as the
constitution of the new nation. Article 13 stated that although the only public religion was
the Reformed each person was to remain free, especially in his religion, and that no one
shall be persecuted or investigated because of his religion. This is the tenet of “Freedom of
Conscience”; everyone is free to believe whatever he or she wishes without fear of persecution.
No longer would so-called heretics be hanged or burned at the stake. The Dutch felt strongly
about this as more Protestants were executed in the Low Countries than any other place in
Europe during the Reformation. Although “Freedom of Conscience” was central to the new
country’s tenets, more important was the principle of pax et concordia—peace and concord. Or,
what price tolerance amid chaos?

In order to survive in that congested corner of Europe, the Dutch needed order and
stability in their communities. Although people could believe what they wished, it was a basic
belief that unity of religion was the goal. However, as rapid as was the spread of Calvinism
throughout the Netherlands, it never became a majority religion, let alone a national religion.
How was it possible to maintain pax et concordia in communities where “Freedom of Conscience”
was a basic tenet, where Lutherans, Mennonites, and other Christian sects were tolerated and
allowed to worship surreptitiously? It was done by a very human reaction to possible conflict
called connivance, or ooghuijckinge in Dutch, literally to wink at something. The Dutch sensed
that a strict prohibition of worship would cause an even greater threat to pax et concordia. Thus,
a narrow path had to be navigated between “Freedom of Conscience” and the preference for
religious unity in a community in order to maintain stability.

For New Netherland, the matter was less complicated. The revised West India Company
“Charter of Freedoms and Exemptions” of 1640 clearly states that no other religion shall be
publicly admitted in New Netherland except for the Reformed, as it is presently preached and
practiced by public authority in the United Provinces. The charter also clearly states that care
be taken to maintain pax et concordia in communities where “Freedom of Conscience”
was a basic tenet, where Lutherans, Mennonites, and other Christian sects were tolerated and
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publicly admitted in New Netherland except for the Reformed, as it is presently preached and
practiced by public authority in the United Provinces. The charter also clearly states that care
be taken to maintain “Freedom of Conscience” for everyone, provided that forbidden assemblies
and conventicles are avoided. To Stuyvesant and his council, and the Reformed predicanten,
there was no room for debate. In an apparent attempt to discourage “connivance” of any kind,
an ordinance was passed in February of 1656 prohibiting the practice of any religion other
than the Reformed. This ordinance, which, by the way, all schouts were obligated by oath to
uphold, was soon put to the test.
During the summer of 1657 a Lutheran minister by the name of Johannes Ernestus Gutwasser arrived at New Amsterdam. The Lutherans apparently hoped that, although their petitions had failed to receive permission to call a minister, if one happened to appear, the authorities would look the other way or just wink. This wasn’t to be the case. Gutwasser preached surreptitiously but eventually was ordered back to Europe in 1659.11

Shortly after Gutwasser’s appearance, another arrival contributed to the religious tension on Manhattan. In August 1657, a ship approached the fort at the tip of Manhattan flying no flag and without firing a salute. The ship’s master showed neither the fiscaal any respect when he came on board, nor Stuyvesant when he came before him, but stood still “with his hat firm on his head, as if a goat.” The ship had left London eight weeks before with Quakers on board. When the ship left Manhattan for its destination of Rhode Island, one of the Dutch ministers commented that is where all the cranks of New England retire. Before the ship sailed through the Hell Gate, two women were left behind: Mary Weatherhead and Dorothy Waugh, strong, young women, who, as the ship sailed out of sight, “began to quake and fly into a frenzy, crying

Figure 8.2. “Pascaer te van Nieu Nederland Streckende vande Noordt Revier tot Hendrick Christiaens Eylandt,” by Jacob Robijn, 1685. Long Island Sound served as a funnel between Rhode Island and Manhattan: In August 1657, the reverends Megapolensis and Drissus surmised that the departure of an English ship with Quakers had sailed for Rhode Island, because “all the cranks of New England retire thither.” From the collection of Joep de Koning.
Figure 8.3. Postage stamp commemorating the Flushing Remonstrance Tercentenary (1957). Photo by Teodors Ermansons.
out loudly in the middle of the street that men should repent, for the Day of Judgment was at hand.” The inhabitants, “not knowing what was the matter, ran to and fro, while one cried ‘Fire’ and another something else.” The two women were seized by the fiscaal and an assistant, who led them to the prison as they “continued to cry out and pray in their manner.” Not the pax et concordia Stuyvesant was trying to maintain in the community.

Unfortunately, we don’t know what happened to the two women—whether they remained in prison or were released. It is possible that they eventually made their way to Vlissingen and were sheltered by Tobias Feake, the schout. In any case, Feake was accused of harboring a Quakeress, which was interpreted as allowing a conventicle or illegal meeting in contravention of his oath. It is no secret that Stuyvesant considered the Quakers an abominable sect who “vilify both the political authorities and the ministers of the Gospel and undermine the state and God’s service.” For Stuyvesant it all probably was a matter of authority, which for the Quakers was a private spiritual experience or the “inner light” devoid of training, and examination of ministerial candidates, and without structure as in other religions, such as the Reformed. Quakers were viewed by civil authorities as seditious anarchists, and by ecclesiastical authorities as “machinations of Satan.” However, Feake had broken his oath to enforce the ordinances of New Netherland, for which Stuyvesant had him prosecuted. During this entire episode Quakers were still being hanged in Massachusetts; the last one was Mary Dyer in 1660. No Quakers were ever hanged in New Netherland.

To Stuyvesant the issue was insubordination; he didn’t need to consider the ideas in the remonstrance because it was an expression of “Freedom of Conscience.” Stuyvesant’s fault was that he refused to connive with or wink at the Quakers.

Several years later the issue of the Quakers was returned to the Netherlands in the form of John Bowne. His banishment from New Netherland for holding Quaker meetings brought about a rebuke from the West India Company regarding Stuyvesant’s handling of the problem. In 1663 the WIC directors wrote that they would rather that such dissidents went elsewhere but doubted whether “we can proceed against them rigorously without diminishing the population and stopping immigration, which must be favored at a so tender stage of the country’s existence.” They ordered Stuyvesant to shut his eyes, at least not force people’s consciences, but allow everyone to have his own belief, as long as he behaves quietly and legally, gives no offense to his neighbors and does not oppose the government. Stuyvesant was back on the narrow path between “Freedom of Conscience” and pax et concordia. In the end Stuyvesant was forced to wink.

**POSTSCRIPT**

If you compare the ideas expressed in the 1657 Flushing Remonstrance with Article XIII of the 1579 Union of Utrecht, they are essentially the same.

**NOTES**


6. See *Union of Utrecht, op cit.*


12. See *ER*, vol. 1, 399 for the letter of Domines Megapolensis and Drisius dated August 14, 1657.

13. Ibid., 400.


15. See NYCD, 15: 526, for a letter from the WIC directors to Stuyvesant, dated April 16, 1663.