

Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom

Reading Level: Elementary School

“I am for freedom of religion”

Thomas Jefferson wanted his tombstone to list the “things that he had given the people.” It reads: “Here was buried Thomas Jefferson Author of the Declaration of Independence of The Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom And Father of the University of Virginia.” Why did Jefferson want the Statute for Religious Freedom on his tombstone?

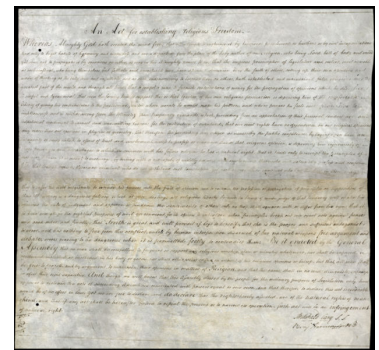
America was settled by people who wanted religious freedom. Thomas Jefferson believed in freedom of religion, too. He believed there should be a “wall between church and state.” He did not believe people should pay taxes to support any church. Jefferson worked to get rid of laws that kept the church in power in Virginia. He had the support of Virginia’s Quakers, Presbyterians and Baptists.

Jefferson wrote the “Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom.” The bill said that “no man shall be compelled (forced) to frequent (go to) or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever.” This was a new idea at the time. In 1779, the bill was sent to the Virginia Assembly. It did not become a law. But it brought together Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Madison agreed with Jefferson.

Jefferson left for Paris in 1784. He was the US foreign minister to France. It was up to James Madison to get the bill made into a law. Madison presented the bill to the Virginia Assembly. In 1786, the bill passed with only a few changes. Madison sent word to Jefferson in Paris.

When the bill passed, Virginia became the first state to separate church and state. It is still part of Virginia’s constitution. It was used as a model for other state’s constitutions. It was also used as a model for the religious language in the Bill of Rights: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Thomas Jefferson believed the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom was one of his greatest achievements. That is why it is written on his tombstone!



Thomas Jefferson. “An Act for Establishing Religious Freedom,” 16 January 1786. Manuscript. Records of the General Assembly, Enrolled Bills, Record Group 78. Lab# 07_0071_01.

