

Grand Commandery Knights Templar of Virginia



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The Establishment of Religious Freedom in Virginia

On January 16, 1786, the Virginia General Assembly passed the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, also known as “The Virginia Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom”. This piece of legislation, drafted by none other than Thomas Jefferson, was then signed into Virginia law on January 19, 1786 and has become one of his greatest accomplishments aside from that other great document he authored, the Declaration of Independence. The Statute, written in three parts, declares plainly that “no man could be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief...”.

A few considerations make this Statute significant. First, our nation’s birth and institution was unique because its citizens were not required to serve neither a sovereign, nor that sovereign’s Deity. We do not have rulers and those rulers could not dictate to us whom to worship, or even if we must serve a Deity at all. Further, not only did this statute predate our own US Constitution by over a year, it also became the model for one of the most important portions of our Constitution, the Bill of Rights.

Today, it may be easy for some of us to take such freedom for granted. After all, we have had them for almost as long as we've been a Nation and certainly as long as any of us have been alive. We take them as God-given. However, we need only look at other nations in our world and see that this freedom is anything but common. People in other parts of the world and especially our Christian Brothers and Sisters, are persecuted for their faith, often to the point of death. We can - and should - thank God for men like our Founders who established our nation with the freedoms of conscience that we enjoy to this day.

The Knights Templar of Virginia does not take religious freedom for granted. Every year, on the 2nd Sunday of the year, we join with the Knights of Columbus in commemorating the signing of The Virginia Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom. We gather at the Fredericksburg train station and march through the streets of town to the Religious Freedom Monument, approximately 1.5 miles, where a brief ceremony takes place. It is generally attended by the mayor of Fredericksburg as well as representatives from Congress and other leaders where we once again celebrate the fact that people of all faiths are free to practice their beliefs free of government intrusion. Once assembled at the monument, we are led in prayer by a member of Clergy, we give honors to our Nation, a wreath is laid at the monument, and we recommit ourselves to constant remembrance and vigilance to see to it that our freedoms are neither forgotten, nor infringed upon. We invite any and all Knights Templar to join us in this celebration.