

Roots of a Westchester Wedding Planted Deeply in Religious Freedom

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*“Can there be such transformation
From a Thorn to a Fish be made?
'Tis a wonder of creation
Happening not in each decade
But since a Fish a Thorn becomes
We trust they'll blend harmoniously
And, as they swim life's current long,
Be happy in each other's company
And as the fishes of the sea
Multiply beneath the waters
May the home of this Fish twain be
Richly blessed with sons and daughters.”*

9/24/1873

The quaint 1873 wedding poem re-printed above was published in the local newspaper, a journal later known as *The Mt. Kisco Recorder*, on the occasion of Martha Jane Thorn's nuptials to Richard Ferris Fish, both of the Town of Bedford. The Thorne estate, known as *Hilltop*, had long been host to some of the finest fetes of the day-- parties which were often described in this same local publication. The Fish family, too, was prominent and well known. Naturally, the announcement of this celebrated union prompted many expressions of spontaneous joy, like the little ditty above that playfully tweaks the surnames of the spouses-to-be.

Long before Miss Thorne ever started picking out swatches of fabric for her wedding gown in anticipation of becoming Mrs. Richard Ferris Fish, her family's legacy had, for centuries, been wed to the principles that remain the bedrock of our nation's most cherished freedoms.

December 27, 2007 marks the 350th Anniversary of the signing of *The Flushing Remonstrance* (1657), a document that many consider the inspiration for the Bill of Rights.¹ Once delivered to Petrus Stuyvesant, Director-General of New Netherlands, this eloquent letter of protest demanding liberty of conscience (religious freedom) cast a long, dark shadow over the lives of the 29 men who signed their names (or “marks“) to it. The third signatory to this notorious document was William Thorne, Sr., the progenitor of the bride celebrated in the ditty above.²

In order to understand the impetus of *The Flushing Remonstrance*, it is helpful to step back a few decades before its signing, and take stock of the political and religious turmoil that was brewing throughout New England. Tracing the roots of the Thorn family of Bedford and Mt. Kisco leads us squarely into the thick of that struggle.

By 1635 William Thorne, a man whose personal journey belongs to the Nation defined by the laws and cultural liberties it served to inform, was an active member of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and in good standing with the Church of Boston. Just six years later, Thorne's maverick views proved to clash with the standards common to New England Puritans. We know this because in September of 1641, Thorne was fined for harboring the escaped son and son-in-law of Ann Marbury Hutchinson, all of whom were opponents of the Church of Boston.³ Thorne's growing independence from the rigid policies of Governor Winthrop's Colony continued to be a source of serious conflict.

When Lady Deborah Moody, an outspoken Anabaptist, herself at odds with Winthrop's agenda, proposed that together (along with 15 others) they leave Massachusetts by cover of night, and sail to New Netherland, a place that held out the hope of religious freedom, Thorne was ready to embark on an American odyssey the implications of which continue to echo to this day.⁴

Initially, the hope of religious freedom proved to be sound. In 1645, the Dutch Director-General, Willem Kieft, granted to Thorne, along with 16 other Englishmen, a patent for a village at Vlissingen Creek, now known as Flushing, New York. With that patent came a promise of "liberty of conscience," the right to worship as the Villagers so chose.⁵

The promise of the patent was not to last long. Kieft was recalled to Holland by the Dutch West Indies Company, and replaced by Petrus Stuyvesant who did not share his predecessor's religious tolerance. Stuyvesant, a war hero, wasted no time in laying down the law.

In 1650, George C. Fox founded the Society of Friends in England.⁶ Missionaries began making their way to the colonies by the mid 1600s. When the ship, *The Woodhouse*, arrived in New Netherlands in August of 1657, Stuyvesant was ready to send it back out to sea. He wanted no part of this "abominable sect" (who came to be known as the Quakers) and banished them from the colony's shores.⁷ Stuyvesant didn't know that some of the missionaries had already gotten off the boat and quietly made their way to Long Island-- the areas now known as Hempstead, Jamaica and Flushing (Queens).

One such missionary, a young firebrand named Robert Hodgson, whose animated preaching style drew enthusiastic crowds, quickly attracted the attention of Hempstead Sheriff, Richard Gildersleeve. Fully aware of Stuyvesant's ban on Quakers worshipping in public, Gildersleeve promptly arrested and imprisoned the young missionary. Upon Stuyvesant's order, Hodgson was literally dragged the whole 15 miles back into New Amsterdam to stand trial. As the proceeding was conducted in Dutch, a language the accused did not speak, the trial was notably brief, but the punishment meted out by Stuyvesant and the Dutch Council proved to be quite interminable.⁸

Determined to discourage any further interest in this new and radical religion, Stuyvesant decided to use Hodgson as an example, and ordered that the young missionary be subjected to a public flogging. This punishment became a form of ritual, parading Hodgson out to be publicly whipped in the hot sun of day, and returning him to jail in the evening, only to be hauled out again for more of the same, another day. This went on and on, until finally Stuyvesant's own sister intervened, pleading for mercy upon the young man's life.⁹ By the time Stuyvesant finally relented, the damage to any moral authority previously enjoyed by the Director-General had dramatically dwarfed.

Politically, Stuyvesant's strategy backfired. Instead of acting as a deterrent, the unvarnished brutality visited upon the young missionary galvanized many of the settlers in sympathy for Hodgson. The public reaction was so strong and heartfelt it even led to spontaneous conversions to the Society of Friends, as it did in the case of Henry Townsend, the very thing Stuyvesant had railed so strongly against.¹⁰

The backlash against Stuyvesant's religious intolerance grew over the months and weeks following the public torture of Robert Hodgson. And by December of 1657, the townsfolk of Flushing decided that something had to be done. Late one night, a group of English settlers (none of whom were yet Quakers) gathered at the Flushing home of Michael Milner where they set their fate, for all of history, with the stroke of a pen. Resolving to let their opinions be heard without equivocation, a blunt letter of protest was inked, the indelible message of which defiantly demanded respect for all religions known unto man. The letter, now known as *The Flushing Remonstrance*, dated 27 December 1657, was thereafter hand delivered upon the Director-General's office in New Amsterdam.¹¹

The immediate impact of *The Flushing Remonstrance* resulted in little more than the arrest and imprisonment of several of its signers, brave men all.¹² Within a few short years, the letter and its demands inspired Flushing landowner John Bowne to an act of civil disobedience that would change everything. Defiantly inviting Quakers to worship in his home, Bowne's singular act poignantly brought to life the sentiments and principles guiding the hands that put words to paper that fateful night. Bowne's arrest and subsequent legal odyssey dramatically cast him into a battle of wills, where he was pitted against Stuyvesant and all the authority the Director-General could muster.

Unlike the dreary outcome of Hodgson's arrest, this time the Quakers came out on top. Bowne's persistent refusal to buckle to Stuyvesant's demands, his eloquent self-defense in which he argued that all residents of New Amsterdam are entitled to 'liberty of conscience' and to worship as they please, and his ultimate acquittal on all charges, resulted in the legal affirmation of religious freedom in the new world.¹³

This remarkable chapter in the history of religious freedom would not have been written if not for the daring of those men who gathered one cold night 350 years ago to draft what is now being celebrated as one of America's most important legal documents.¹⁴ As stated above, one of the first Signers of *The Flushing Remonstrance* was William Thorne, Sr., progenitor of Martha Jane Thorn, the bride affectionately tweaked in the ditty

reprinted above. So the roots of the Westchester Wedding celebrated in 1873 were planted deeply in the principles of religious freedom that have become emblematic of our nation's most cherished liberty.

I never knew my great-grandmother, Martha Jane Thorn, for she had long passed from this world by the time I was ever a twinkle in my parents' eyes. Had I ever met her, I would like to think that I would have had the presence of mind to thank her for the Thorne family's indelible imprint on this enduring chapter in American History.

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¹ Tabetha Garman, Designed for the Good of All, p. 94. Accessible at www.bownehouse.org

² Garman, Designed for the Good of All, p. 81

³ "Relevant Facts Regarding William Thorne" by Philip Voyle Thorne. Accessible at John Coutant Thorn's Homepage, <http://thorn.pair.com>.

⁴ Cooper, A Dangerous Woman, pp. 86, 87

⁵ Edmund Bailey O'Callaghan, A Documentary History of New York, Volume I, p. 629

⁶ Oxford English Dictionary, Fox, George C.

⁷ Garman, For the Good of All, pp. 69-70, 84-85

⁸ Garman, For the Good of All, pp. 72-74

⁹ Garman, For the Good of All, pp. 74-76

¹⁰ Garman, For the Good of All, p. 77

¹¹ O'Callaghan, A Documentary History of New York, Volume VIII, p.187

¹² O'Callaghan, A Documentary History of New York, Volume III, p.187

¹³ Garman, For the Good of All, pp. 91-94

¹⁴ www.flushingremonstrance.info, see also *The Avalon Project* at Yale University School of Law