

Obama Declares Religious Freedom Day

In a proclamation released by the White House on Friday, President Barack Obama declared Monday as Religious Freedom Day.

“For nearly four centuries, men and women have immigrated to America’s shores in pursuit of religious freedom,” Obama writes in the beginning of the proclamation. “Hailing from diverse backgrounds and faiths, countless settlers have shared a simple aspiration—to practice their beliefs free from prejudice and persecution.”

The Virginia General Assembly took a step to reserve this freedom in 1786 by passing the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which brought the ideal of religious tolerance to life and was a significant step leading to the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

“On Religious Freedom Day, we celebrate this historic milestone, reflect upon the Statute’s declaration that ‘Almighty God hath created the mind free,’ and reaffirm that the American people will remain forever unshackled in matters of faith,” the president explains.

Obama goes on to say that as the nation has grown, so has its diversity of faiths, cultures and traditions.

“Our long history of religious tolerance and pluralism has strengthened our country, helped create a vibrant civil society and remained true to the principles enshrined in our founding documents,” he writes.

The president also explains that the U.S. is not only committed to religious liberty for all Americans, but also for people around the world. He asks citizens to think about how

religious liberties enhance our nation and our lives and to “lend our voice to all people striving to exercise their innate right to a free mind.”

In conclusion, Obama writes: “I call on all Americans to commemorate this day with events and activities that teach us about this critical foundation of our Nation’s liberty, and show us how we can protect it for future generations at home and around the world.”

Religious Freedom Day first appeared in 1974 when the late Kurt F. Leidecker, then a professor emeritus at Mary Washington College, pleaded with Fredericksburg Bicentennial Commission to “commemorate in some way the establishment of religious freedom here in its plans for the city’s celebration in 1976 and 1977,” according to *The Free Lance-Star*’s archives.

The Knights of Columbus, a Catholic group, later joined in on Religious Freedom Day activities, and continues to hold an annual parade and ceremony.