“To Bigotry No Sanction...”

NEWS FROM THE

George Washington Institute for Religious Freedom

HARVARD SYMPOSIUM

On May 1, 2014, an overflow audience of more than 250 filled Harvard University’s Tsai Auditorium for the Inaugural Ambassador John L. Loeb, Jr. Symposium on Religious Freedom and Its Implications. Henry Louis Gates Jr., the Alphonse Fletcher University Professor and director of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research, moderated a lively dialogue among Angela W. Buchdahl, senior rabbi at New York City’s Central Synagogue; Sheikh Yasir Qadhi, dean of academic affairs at the Al-Maghrib Institute; and Reverend J. Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. The panel discussed the role of religion in public life, the challenges of interfaith dialogue and the role of religion in making the world a better place.

Gates called on the panelists to justify faith-based political activism in a society that values separation of church and state. “Separation doesn’t mean we need to go and hide and not try to make the world better,” Walker responded. “We Baptists roll up our sleeves and get involved, motivated by our religious convictions. Martin Luther King and many others lived according to this tradition, and the country is far better off for it.” Qadhi added that the 9/11 terrorist attacks taught American Muslims that “to be American means to fight for your rights and be integrated into society. After 9/11, we’re still battling,” he said, despite ongoing waves of Islamophobia. Buchdahl said, “We are building coalitions around gun control and violence, as well as quality education and problems of income inequality. Each of these is a moral issue rooted in our faith traditions. If our faith-based communities aren’t talking about these issues, then we don’t have any reason for being.”

An attendee asked the panelists how they engage in dialogue with the one-third of Americans under 30 who have no identification with religion. ‘As a person of faith,’ answered Rabbi Buchdahl, ‘I feel that God has had a very bad marketing campaign. Too many people claim to speak definitively for God, and it’s become a real turnoff for young people. We need to do a better job letting people know what God stands for.’

Gates asked the panelists how to build bridges among diverse religious faiths and nonreligious groups. Walker responded that finding areas of common interest is key, as is mutual respect. Qadhi emphasized the need to air religious differences, “We need
Sheikh Qadhi recalled participating in a large interfaith service at a Memphis synagogue in which a pastor ended his sermon by saying, ‘I have to tell you that unless you believe in the Lord Savior Jesus Christ, you won’t go to heaven.’ Qadhi understatedly observed, ‘Now this caused an awkward moment.’ He continued, ‘The next morning, the synagogue’s senior rabbi called me to apologize if I’d felt uncomfortable about what the pastor had said. (And, by the way, there must be a good joke here about the rabbi who calls the sheikh to apologize for the pastor.) But I told the rabbi that I hadn’t felt offended at all.’ Airing these differences, said Qadhi, had improved his relationship with the pastor. He observed that ‘sometimes we need to let these elephants out of the room before we can discuss other issues.’

ASPEN INSTITUTE’S INCLUSIVE AMERICA PROJECT

Funding from The Peter Jay Sharp Foundation has enabled GWIRF to partner with the Aspen Institute’s Inclusive America Project (IAP) in an effort to improve the environment for America’s increasing religious diversity. Professor David Gergen of Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government and former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright serve as IAP’s co-chairs.

The IAP is collaborating with Boys and Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) and the Y of the USA (Y-USA), which between them serve 9 million youth and their families annually. Both organizations have inclusiveness and non-discrimination as core elements in their mission. Many of their local branches are located in the most culturally, racially and religiously diverse communities, and are particularly likely to encounter new immigrants whose religious faiths may be unfamiliar to staff members.

The chief diversity and inclusion officers of the Y-USA and BGCA have been working with a panel of experts convened by the IAP, including GWIRF’s executive director Michael Feldberg, to address the issue of religious inclusion at their respective facilities. IAP staff conducted research at 10 local branches of Y’s and Clubs from Portland, OR to Mt. Vernon, NY to identify the kinds of problems staff typically encounter in dealing with minority religious beliefs with which they might be unfamiliar. With GWIRF funding and editorial input, IAP is developing a resource manual for the leadership and staffs of both national organizations. The manual will help them to anticipate and respond to the challenges of welcoming a religiously diverse population in 21st-century America.
WASHINGTON’S LETTER TRAVELS TO SCHOOLS IN THE NORTHEAST

THE LETTER GOES TO WASHINGTON DEPOT, CT

How fitting that a George Washington Letter Reading Program took place in Washington Depot, CT! Our first president had traveled through the area several times during the American Revolution.

GWIRF Advisory Board Member Dan Lufkin volunteered to read and discuss the Letter at Washington Depot’s Rumsey Hall School, which his children attend.

Rumsey Hall’s headmaster Thomas W. Farmen and director of studies Brooke T. Giese initiated a twelve-day program on tolerance in February this year. Mr. Lufkin kicked off the sequence by reading and discussing George Washington’s Letter with students in kindergarten, third grade and Rumsey Hall’s upper school – sixth through ninth grades.

These photographs attest to the wonder of Mr. Lufkin’s skill in reaching so many young students with Washington’s inspiring words on religious freedom.

THE LETTER VISITS WINDSOR, CT AND CANAAN, NH

GWIRF Advisory Board member Nick Loeb brought the Letter to the attention of two schools that he had attended: The Loomis Chaffee School in Windsor, CT and Cardigan Mountain School in Canaan, NH.

On February 24, 2014, Tim Struthers, Loomis Chaffee’s director of development, used the school’s daily online bulletin to invite the school’s students, faculty, staff and parents to “Read and appreciate George Washington’s Birthday Letter” and provided a link to the Letter itself.

Loomis Chaffee history instructor Rachel Engelke incorporated the Letter into her course on Global Human Rights. Although a history teacher, she had not known of the Letter and greatly appreciated Nick Loeb’s bringing it to the school’s attention. Ms. Engelke wrote to Mr. Struthers, “I was pleased that many of the students were able to draw upon their World History knowledge from freshman year in making connections to the early Loomis family — especially the theme of leaving England and coming to colonial America because of religious persecution. Another student observed that even though there was no equality yet for women or blacks, she found it remarkable that Washington was advocating religious equality.”

David McCusker, head of the Cardigan Mountain School, told Nick Loeb that what he had shared was clearly of significant historic importance and that he appreciated the chance to share this information with his colleagues for future planning of Presidents’ Day observances. Nick Loeb responded that reading and discussing the Letter may also fit during Martin Luther King Day.

“All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.”

– George Washington
Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, 1790
THE LETTER AS INSPIRATION FOR ESSAY CONTESTS

Over past years, GWIRF has sponsored annual high school essay contests challenging students to apply the George Washington Letter to contemporary issues of religious freedom and minority rights. The first was sponsored at The Hotchkiss School (Lakeville, CT) in 1992. Since 2008, essay contests have been taking place at Harrison (NY) High School and Rogers High School in Newport, RI, the home of today’s Congregation Jeshuat Israel, successor to the Hebrew Congregation.

NEW YORK STATE COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES

Dr. Larry Paska, Director of Social Studies for the Harrison Central School District, supervises GWIRF’s essay contest at Harrison High School. As president-elect of the New York State Council for the Social Studies, he invited GWIRF to apply to offer a workshop about teaching the Letter at that organization’s annual conference, which was held in Albany, NY in March 2014.

The conference attracted over 300 educators dedicated to the social studies arena. GWIRF’s proposal was accepted, and Michael Feldberg, GWIRF’s executive director, and Judith W. Ringer, GWIRF’s director of institutional advancement, traveled to Albany for the conference.

On March 27, Dr. Feldberg presented a workshop about the Letter to teachers, curriculum coordinators and social studies administrators.

Dr. Paska later said, “Our participants were highly engaged in using George Washington’s letter as a critical text of both early American history and our continued push for basic rights and freedoms. We look forward to future partnerships with the Institute on professional learning for New York’s social studies teachers.”

Ms. Ringer also attended a workshop about the First Amendment’s Establishement Clause. The workshop leader, Suffern High School teacher Robert J. Wilson, had already been teaching the George Washington Letter, as had several other teachers in the workshop.

GWIRF has been invited to participate in March of 2015 at the statewide annual conference in Syracuse, as well as at a regional conference during December 2014 of the Westchester -Lower Hudson Council for the Social Studies.

“To bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance”

– George Washington

Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, 1790
FUTURE TEACHERS AND THE LETTER

Two generous grants from The Peter Jay Sharp Foundation have enabled GWIRF to launch its Future Teachers Initiative (FTI). Our goal is to help students currently enrolled in undergraduate and graduate schools of education to become familiar with George Washington’s Letter to the Hebrew Congregation. The Future Teachers Initiative encourages faculty in college and university schools of education to introduce Washington’s Letter in their courses so that their students can integrate the Letter into their own teaching from the start of their careers.

With guidance from a team of expert teacher educators and curriculum specialists, Michael Feldberg, GWIRF’s executive director, has been exploring strategies for introducing the Letter to faculty at schools of education.

GWIRF is now in the process of implementing the advisory panel’s recommendations to create a new website to accommodate teacher educators and their students, develop a social media presence, offer workshops at various national and regional conferences for teacher educators, and sponsor symposia and public events in partnership with schools of education.

GWIRF SPONSORS ASHBROOK CENTER’S RELIGION IN AMERICAN HISTORY AND POLITICS PROGRAM

National and state standards for the teaching of history in public schools require that high school students read, understand and discuss original documents. There is near-unanimous agreement across the ideological spectrum from secular humanists to the evangelical “Religious Right” that George Washington’s Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, RI is one of the fundamental documents that every American middle and high school student should read and discuss.

For that reason, GWIRF is funding the Ashbrook Center at Ashland University (OH) to help the Center develop content ideas for website materials on “Religion in American History and Politics,” an interactive online exhibit that the Ashbrook Center is creating. A group of educators and web developers assembled by the Ashbrook Center will meet at the Loeb Visitors Center and visit Touro Synagogue in Spring of 2015. Inspired by the experience, the team will spend three days in Newport developing recommendations about which documents should be included, what the site should suggest to teachers for using them effectively in their classrooms, how to draw teachers to the site, etc. Of course, the George Washington Letter, already one of Ashbrook’s “core American documents,” will be included.

Over the past five years, GWIRF has funded Facing History and Ourselves (MA) and the Bill of Rights Institute (VA) to develop and disseminate curricula to encourage teachers to use Washington’s Letter as part of their lesson plans. GWIRF has twice funded the First Freedom Center (VA) to make the Letter the topic of its annual national written and video essay contests in high schools across America about American religious freedom. We are pleased to add the Ashbrook Center to our list of partners in spreading the message of George Washington’s Letter to the Hebrew Congregation.

HELP GWIRF TO CELEBRATE THE 225TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE WASHINGTON LETTER!

In August 2015, 225 years will have passed since our first president penned his proclamation of religious equality to the tiny Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island. His letter promised every citizen the blessing of religious freedom as an “inherent natural right.”

You can help increase awareness of this extraordinary document by having it read and discussed in as many places as possible around the time of Washington’s Birthday, February 22, 2015. To that end, we are asking our board members, donors, friends, family, colleagues, educators and anyone else interested in religious freedom to host or participate in a Letter Reading Program in their school or their children’s or grandchildren’s school(s). We also urge appointed and elected officials to read and discuss the Letter around our first president’s birthday.

This letter is also appropriate to read at any gathering that celebrates religious freedom, such as Passover, Memorial Day, July 4 and Thanksgiving.

Two and a quarter centuries after he wrote them, Washington’s words resound loudly today. They proclaim witness against the heinous acts of religious prejudice, hatred and bigotry now happening across the globe. His call to move beyond mere “toleration” to respect and acceptance of all, regardless of faith and background, must become the touchstone of the twenty-first century.

If you want to learn more about how to arrange for a Letter Reading at a school or other public forum and/or would like guidance on how to conduct one, please contact Judith W. Ringer at jringerjloebfdn@aol.com or 212-509-1500, ext. 15.
A TRIBUTE TO DAVID KLEIMAN

The George Washington Institute for Religious Freedom mourns the passing of David Kleiman, curator of the Loeb Visitors Center at Touro Synagogue, webmaster of GWIRF’s websites and producer of many of its publications. He was also in charge of the Loeb Database of Early American Jewish Portraits.

David and his beloved wife Kate completed the exhibitions at the Loeb Visitors Center, established the Center’s presence in Newport and promoted its significance as a teaching resource to thousands of visitors. David helped expand GWIRF’s online educational outreach to the world.

David’s devotion to colonial Newport’s religious history represents only one of his numerous interests. Among many other things, he was a world-renowned genealogist, director of education at the Seaport Museum in New York City, folklorist, tireless collector and performer of sea shanties, concert promoter, computer programmer, management consultant, holder of an MBA degree and all-but-dissertation for a doctorate in anthropology. Above all, David should be remembered as a devoted husband, son, brother, grandfather, uncle, friend, teacher, mentor and inspiration. He is sorely missed by all who knew him.

ONLINE IMAGES OF EARLY AMERICAN JEWS

A majority of American Jews are descended from immigrants who arrived in the United States during the great wave of Eastern European immigration between 1882 and 1914. But Jews have lived here and helped to develop American society since 1654. For more than two decades, GWIRF’s founder, Ambassador John L. Loeb, Jr., has been documenting the presence and prominence of American Jewry through the Loeb Database of Early American Jewish Portraits. The database provides the viewer with access to every known portrait of a Jewish American painted before 1865. Each portrait is supplemented with the name and life dates of the sitter and the portraitist, the year in which the portrait was painted, the portrait’s medium and dimensions and the name of its holding institution or owner.

The Loeb Database is a joint project of GWIRF and the American Jewish Historical Society. You can view its images and read biographical sketches of more than 200 pre-Civil War American Jews at www.loebjewishportraits.org. In time for Washington’s Birthday in February of 2015, GWIRF will be refurbishing and enlivening the website. Be sure to check it out on a computer near you.

FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE LOEB VISITORS CENTER

When the Ambassador John L. Loeb, Jr. Visitors Center opened on the campus of the Touro Synagogue National Historic Site in Newport, RI in August 2009, it was greeted by critical acclaim for its architecture, its landscaping and, above all, its innovative way of telling the story of religious freedom and separation of church and state in American history. Architecture critic David Brussat described the Visitors Center as “obviously a classical building, yet it is unlike any other. No work of classicism could possibly depart from a canon with greater dignity, hence no building could possibly fit onto a historic street with greater distinction.”

The Newport Garden Society has twice cited the re-landscaped Patriots Park, which links the Loeb Visitors Center to Touro Synagogue, as the best public garden in Newport. Since its opening, approximately 60,000 individuals from across the United States and the world and of many backgrounds and faiths have made the Center and historic Touro Synagogue their destination.

Many of the Center’s exhibits are interactive, allowing visitors to examine important documents such as George Washington’s 1790 Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, RI on a number of interpretive levels. Viewers can watch video re-enactments of important moments in colonial Newport’s history of religious and cultural diversity, or of the planning and construction of Touro Synagogue itself. Each year since its opening, increasing numbers of school children, summer campers and tour groups have discovered the unique experience of touring the nation’s oldest standing synagogue and its one-of-a-kind Visitors Center.

For information about visiting days/hours, tour schedules and travel directions, please go to www.tourosynagogue.org
A GENESIS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM 
– NOW AN E-BOOK

In 2013, GWIRF published Melvin I. Urofsky’s beautifully illustrated and highly readable history, *A Genesis of Religious Freedom: The Story of the Jews of Newport, RI and Touro Synagogue*. Noted historian Jonathan D. Sarna has said of the book, “Well-researched and beautifully produced, this is the best and most comprehensive volume in print on the Jews of Newport, the Touro synagogue, and George Washington’s famous letter declaring religious liberty the inherent natural right of all Americans.” Thomas P.I. Goddard, chairman of the board of the Newport Historical Society, observed that “this book, combined with the presence of the Ambassador John L. Loeb, Jr. Visitors Center, gives historians and interested citizens a much deeper understanding of the important role that Newport’s Jewish community played in the birth of our nation.”

The book was published with the generous support of The David Berg Foundation; Furthermore: a program of the J.M. Kaplan Fund; and Ambassador John L. Loeb, Jr.

“A REBUKE TO BIGOTRY

George Washington’s Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, RI has provided the inspiration for all of GWIRF’s efforts and accomplishments. We are not alone in being moved to action by its message. With financial support from GWIRF, in Spring of 2015 the renowned international civic education organization Facing History and Ourselves will publish *A Rebuke to Bigotry*, a collection of essays authored by a wide array of distinguished thinkers reflecting on the Letter. The writers represent fields as diverse as history, neurology, law, philosophy and education.


Facing History and Ourselves will conduct national and international workshops and events to launch this essay collection throughout 2015.

The volume is compiled and edited by Adam Strom, director of innovation at Facing History, and Michael Feldberg, executive director of GWIRF.
MISSION OF THE GEORGE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

To create greater awareness of the historic roots of religious freedom and the separation of church and state in the United States by disseminating the message of George Washington’s “Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island of 1790” and by introducing teachers and students to the principles expressed in the Letter.

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FACTS & FIGURES

> In 2014, more than 13,500 individuals were welcomed at the Loeb Visitors Center in Newport, RI, where they learned about the history of religious freedom in the colonial and early national periods, experienced an interactive exhibit about George Washington’s Letter and took a guided tour of historic Touro Synagogue. Since it opened, the Visitors Center has hosted approximately 60,000 visitors.

> The Loeb Visitors Center and guided tours of Touro Synagogue are available at no charge to any Rhode Island public school group.

NEED HELP? WANT TO HELP? JUST CONTACT US

If you want to host or participate in a Letter Reading Program during 2015, have other ideas of ways that you can help to spread the word and/or support GWIRF’s efforts to teach George Washington’s message of religious freedom, please contact Judith W. Ringer, Director of Institutional Advancement, at 212-509-1500, ext. 15 or e-mail her at: jringerjloebfdn@aol.com.

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