

History of Religious Freedom

In January 1777, Thomas Jefferson travelled to Fredericksburg, VA and with a small cohort of men, drafted what would become the Bill to Establish Religious Freedom in Virginia (commonly referred to as the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom).

With Jefferson's early writings of the bill rooted in Fredericksburg, the city serves as a historical landmark of a momentous step in the sculpting of early America. Many local groups and institutions, such as the University of Mary Washington and the Catholic organization the Knights of Columbus, have dedicated time and resources to commemorate the statute annually, by their sponsoring of the Jefferson Lecture.

The Jefferson Lecture began 45 years ago, when the Knights of Columbus, a group active for over a century, created an annual celebration to commemorate the statute. Every year, on the second Sunday of the month of January, members of the organization don elaborate, militaryesque black suits and march to the Thomas Jefferson Religious Freedom Monument on the Washington Avenue Mall at Pitt Street in Fredericksburg.

Less than a mile away from the monument sits UMW, a community passionate in the advocacy of religious freedom and an active collaborator with the annual commemoration of the statute.

The UMW community became involved with the event in 2002, when the Department of Classics, Philosophy, and Religion (CPR) worked with the Knights of Columbus and surrounding churches in the decision making of the keynote speaker for the Jefferson Lecture.

Professor Craig Vasey actively attended meetings with the mayor of Fredericksburg and the Knights of Columbus to offer advice on who should be invited to speak at the event. The

department's participation with the Knights of Columbus lasted for several years until the department decided to involve the UMW community more by holding its own Jefferson Lecture at the university.

The department began this new tradition with an invitation to the then president of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Nadine Strossen (1991-2008). Since Strossen's talk, the department has continued their Jefferson Lecture every January until the year 2018, where it was decided that a two-day conference discussing the subject of religious freedom in a post 2016 election America.

Organized by Professor Mehdi Aminrazavi and Professor Jennifer Barry of the CPR department, the conference, titled "Religious Freedom in a Fractured America," is the department's effort to address the growing religious intolerance which has affected members of not only the UMW community, but the public community as well. The speakers of this year's event, hand selected by members of the department, come from various disciplines and professional backgrounds in the hope of bringing different perspectives and solutions to the growing unrest of religious tolerance in the area.