

## The Tolerance Triangle

This information is courtesy of our friends of Old St. Thomas we learned more about the rich history. In doing our research, we came to find out that Chester Heights and neighboring Concord Township were an inspiration for a portion of the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights of the United States. How?

This general area was founded in 1683 by Quakers who settled here. The majority of them met for religious services at The Concord Friends Meeting. (Friends Meeting minutes are extensive and act as historical record) Years later, some of those congregants decided to return to the Anglican Church and established St. John's Episcopal less than a mile away on Concord Rd. Meanwhile, Thomas Wilcox was hosting visiting Catholic priests at his home in Ivy Mills. In 1729, the first Catholic parish in all of Pennsylvania was established by Thomas Wilcox. It is still here and it's the oldest parish in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and in the state of Pennsylvania.

The leaders of these three churches – Concord Friends Quaker Meeting, St. John's Episcopal and St. Thomas Roman Catholic– got together and agreed to support one another's organizations and fundraising and to live in peace and respect– to truly represent William Penn's policy of religious tolerance.

In this timeframe, other colonies had "official" churches where all residents had to worship. In Philadelphia, with people living in close quarters, there was fighting and strife over religious practices. During the early days of the colonies, a Baptist Church organization wrote to Thomas Jefferson their worries and concerns that they would not be able to continue to worship their way under our new country. His response back is the first time the phrase "separation of church and state" was used as a paraphrase of what would become an important portion of the First Amendment.

Religious freedom was not guaranteed in the colonies– but here in Concord Township and the future Chester Heights, religious tolerance was alive and well. The area of the three local churches became known as the Toleration Triangle.

But how does this all connect?

Thomas Wilcox had a paper mill at his Ivy Mills home. He made the paper that his good friend, Benjamin Franklin, used to print Poor Richard's Almanac, with his invention, the printing press. Every few months, Benjamin would come visit Thomas from Philadelphia and buy more paper. The two men would chat, and Thomas came to tell Benjamin about the Toleration Triangle. Our area, and the religious freedoms people enjoyed because of the separation of Church and State was the example and inspiration for the [Establishment Clause](#) and [Free Exercise Clause](#) of the [First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States](#) which reads: "*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...*" We have a small borough, but it is rich in history.

For more information on this topic, tours of the old chapel and of the Wilcox homestead and paper mill, please contact the Friends of Old St. Thomas at [www.friendsfoldstthomas.org](http://www.friendsfoldstthomas.org)