

Roger Williams

National Memorial
Rhode Island

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



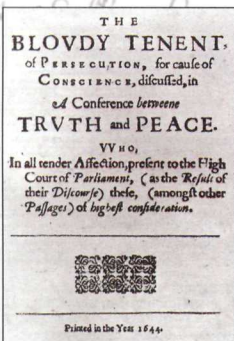
“...that no civil magistrate, no King, nor Caesar, have any power over the souls or consciences of their subjects, in the matters of God and the crown of Jesus.”

—*The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*

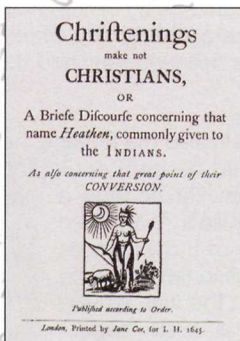
Roger Williams

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

—*First Amendment, U.S. Constitution*



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British Library

Through word and act Roger Williams fought for the idea that religion must not be subject to regulation by the state—that it should be a matter of individual conscience. Americans take this for granted today, but most people of his time condemned such thoughts as naive and dangerous, believing that religious freedom and civil order could not coexist. Williams extended his defense of the individual conscience to American Indians, respecting their rights and condemning imposed Christianity. As founder of Rhode Island, he put his beliefs into practice, giving “shelter for persons distressed of conscience.”

Defender of Conscience

Born in London in 1603, Roger Williams's academic promise drew the attention of eminent jurist Edward Coke, who helped him acquire an excellent education. He was trained as an Anglican clergyman but grew increasingly sympathetic with Puritans, who believed the Church of England had not made a clean enough break with Catholicism. The options for Puritans were to risk jail, or worse, by attempting reform in England or to move to a more tolerant Holland. In 1629 a third choice arose: A group of Puritans founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony and elected John Winthrop governor. They sailed the following year, founding Boston and several other settlements.

Rejecting the Middle Way Roger and his wife Mary sailed with another group in 1631. On his arrival he was noted by Winthrop as “a godly minister,” but it did not take long for the two to clash. Williams soon became a separatist, a Puritan who wanted to leave the Anglican Church. He felt that not separating from the established church was “middle walking” and “halting between Christ and antichrist.” But the colony refused so radical a step. Other issues set Williams at odds with the Puritans: He rejected civil jurisdiction over “First Table” laws (the first four of the Ten Commandments), which were matters of individual conscience; he questioned the right of English charters to take land from American Indians; and he denounced “hireling” ministers paid for by taxation and civil oaths taken in God's name. Massachusetts Bay finally sentenced the troublesome minister to deportation; he fled the colony to avoid arrest (see map below).

The Narragansetts deeded Williams land in 1636 for a colony at the headwaters of the Narragansett Bay—a place he named Providence after “God's merciful Providence unto me in my distress.” After he was joined there by family and a few friends, the settlers formally agreed to “hold forth Liberty of Conscience,” making laws “only in civill things.” But he had to divide his energies between the new colony—soon called Rhode Island—and other developments. Though he remained an outcast, he was valuable to Massachusetts as a negotiator. When rumors spread that the Narragansetts would ally themselves with the Pequots against the English, Governor Winthrop asked Williams to meet

with the Narragansetts to prevent the alliance. Williams succeeded, even persuading them to help the English. The ensuing war of 1637–38 greatly reduced the Pequot population. In the following decades Williams would repeatedly be asked to negotiate with Indians on behalf of the colony that had expelled him.

Williams remained busy, establishing a trading post south of Providence around 1637 and cofounding the first Baptist church in North America in 1638. By 1643 the towns of Portsmouth, Newport, and Warwick had also been established in the area by fellow dissenters. That year Williams returned to England to secure a charter for the colony, and in 1651, trying to hold Rhode Island together, he traveled to England again to defend the charter against another grant that threatened to split the colony.

In his last years Williams's health deteriorated. In 1676 he reported that he was “near destitute,” the result of a lifetime of commitment to the colony without trying to accumulate land or to build up a fortune—the first order of business for many prominent colonists. He had sold his trading post—his one dependable source of income—to finance his 1651 trip to London to defend the colony. Williams died in 1683, his wife Mary having died several years before.

The Dream Realized In his final year Williams wrote a letter to the citizens of Rhode Island, pleading with them to put away “heats and hatreds” and “Submit to Government.” He also expressed contentment with the colony's charter, which, more than any other, set into law what he had always sought—freedom for the “Souls of Men.” For Williams such a goal was self-evident, a truth he had spent his life trying to make others see. Forty years earlier he had written that “a man may clearly discern with his eye, and as it were touch with his finger, that according to the verity of holy scripture...men's consciences ought in no sort to be violated, urged, or constrained.” These ideas were specifically addressed, though not so vividly, more than a century later in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Through that document this complex man's abiding passion—freedom of conscience—found protection in the law of the land.

Religious Conflict in England

England in the 16th century demanded religious conformity, forbidding “unlawful assemblies...under color or pretense of any exercise of religions, contrary to her majesty's said laws.” Catholics and radical Puritans who refused to at least outwardly conform suffered all the persecutions the age dealt to dissenters—public humiliation, torture, and sometimes death. The Stuart monarchs of the early 17th century were no more receptive to unorthodoxy. This period, however, coincided with the early migrations to the new world. Crown and Parliament allowed more latitude in these matters in the colonies; many Puritans chose to emigrate.

In 1642 conflicts between the Stuarts and Parliament came to a head in the English Civil War, in which Puritans took up the parliamentary cause. Roger Williams's views, however, remained too extreme for both sides. While on a visit to London in 1644 he published *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, calling for religious freedom for all:

“Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or Antichristian.” Parliament ordered all copies burned. By 1653 the country was under the rule of Oliver Cromwell, an Independent Puritan. Independents believed each congregation should order its affairs without interference from an outside body. Williams invoked England's example when urging Massachusetts to allow its churches more freedom.

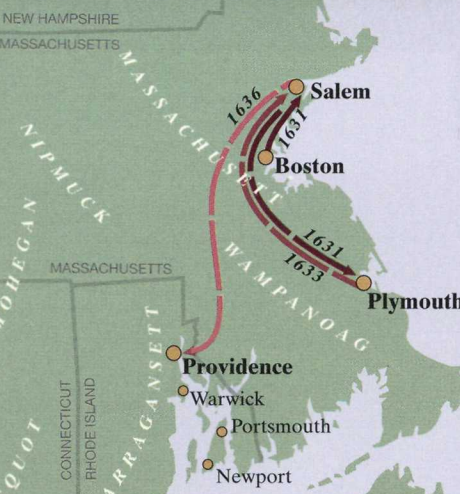
After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, Anglicanism was again the national religion; one style of conformity was replaced with another. But dissent was less threatening across the Atlantic. In 1663 Charles II granted Rhode Island a charter confirming that no one would be “molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question, for difference in opinion in matters of religion.” England's 1689 Act of Toleration took a step in that direction, allowing all forms of Protestant worship that recognized the Holy Trinity. Public worship by Catholics and members of other religious groups was still banned.



Dissenters like Roger Williams who published their beliefs risked having their works burned—at the least.

From *Curious Punishments of Bygone Days*, Alice Morse Earle, 1895

The Course of His Journey



White labels indicate historic tribal lands. Gray lines and labels indicate present-day states.

February 1631 Williams arrives in Boston.

April 1631 Williams declines an offer of a ministry in Boston; he accepts a position as assistant minister in Salem, whose church shares Williams's separatist beliefs.

August 1631 Salem is persuaded by the Massachusetts Bay Colony to withdraw its offer. Williams accepts a similar position in Plymouth. Gov. William Bradford describes Williams as a “man godly and zealous, having many precious parts,” but the relationship sours. Again Williams's beliefs and his uncompromising defense of them lead to a falling out.

By 1633 Williams is back in Salem; he continues to denounce the New England church's connection to the compromising Anglicans and its insistence on the duty of the state to control its citizens' spiritual lives. When Williams urges Salem's church to separate itself from others in Massachusetts Bay, he

goes too far, losing the support of his own congregation. Due to Williams's “new and dangerous opinions,” Massachusetts Bay convicts him and plans to deport him to England. Barely avoiding arrest, Williams flees the colony in February 1636.

Spring 1636 After spending the winter with the Wampanoags, Williams makes his way to the headwaters of Narragansett Bay. There he founds Providence on land deeded to him by the Narragansetts.

Roger Williams's portable compass and sundial.



National Park Service

Roger Williams

“...in consideration of many kindnesses and services he hath continually done for us...we do freely give unto him all that land from those rivers reaching to Pautextet River.”

Roger Williams retained close ties with the Narragansett sachems who deeded land to him in 1636. Seven years later Miantonomo, one of the chiefs, was murdered by an enemy tribe in conspiracy with the English. Williams and the other chief, Canonicus, remained lifelong friends. As payment for the land, Canonicus was over the years allowed to take what he wished from Williams's trading post. Shell bead strings, shown here, were used ceremonially and as a medium of exchange.

Peabody Essex Museum

To Know a People

The Algonquian-speaking tribes that Roger Williams came to know so well had long prospered in southeastern New England. By the time the first Puritans arrived in their homeland, these tribes had already encountered a number of Europeans, from Basque fishermen to traders and explorers like Verrazano. They were ready to deal with the English settlers on equal terms. The tribes of the region—Pequot, Wampanoag, Narragansett—were migratory people whose economy was based on a combination of agriculture and hunting and gathering. They moved with the yearly cycles, making the round of established places where they could best exploit the resources of the seasons. In spring they settled in dispersed groups in coastal areas, always near a waterway, living in circular wigwams made of bent saplings covered with woven reed mats, hides, or bark. They harvested fish and shellfish, trapped ducks and geese, hunted, and gathered a variety of plant foods. Periodic burnings of large areas created grazing meadows to draw deer, a staple game animal, and opened up fields for planting maize, beans, and squash. The remaining fire-resistant trees produced a harvest of nuts in the fall. Though they never lived in settlements large enough to be called “villages,” in winter they moved inland to converge in sheltered valleys. There several families lived in long houses of the same construction as wigwams. During the cold months they relied on fresh shellfish, stored food, and hunting to make it through lean times.

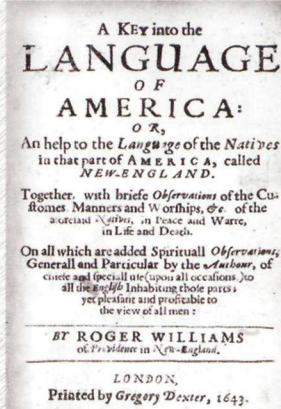
A Fragile Bond Roger Williams spent a lifetime trying to forge closer ties with the Wampanoag and Narragansett tribes—especially the latter. The Narragansetts deeded him the land for Providence and, with the Wampanoags, helped the settlers in the colony's early months. Thereafter Williams maintained a complex relationship with the Indians, defending their rights, studying them as an anthropologist, and dealing with them as a diplomat. In 1643 Williams published *A Key into the Language of America*, which alternated translations of Narragansett words with related observations on the tribe's culture. For example, *uppaquontup* (the head) and *wesheck* (hair) preceded the observation that “some cut their haire round, and some as low and as short as the sober English.” Williams's religious tract, *Christenings make not Christians*, was a powerful condemnation of mass

Indian conversions, based on the assumption that the conscience of an Indian should be as inviolate as that of a European. He preached the gospel and lived the Christian life as an example to them, but always believed they had the right to worship as they wished.

As much as Williams admired the Indians, he never romanticized them. To him they could be both noble and “insolent.” And he was first of all English: He headed a militia during King Philip's War, then presided over the sale of Indian slaves to raise money for English families who had lost their homes in the war. Nevertheless, Williams had a deep respect for tribal rights that was extraordinary for his time. When settlers seized Indian land, Williams asserted that the Indian had as strong a sense of land ownership as the English. When others, in the Indian deed to Rhode Island, chose to interpret the granting of grazing rights along a river bank to mean rights to the entire region, Williams insisted on a literal interpretation. Perhaps the best indicator of Williams's relationship with the Indians is the dying request of the Narragansett sachem Canonicus, the grantor of that deed and a man to whom Williams attributed “infinite wisdom and merits.” Canonicus asked that Williams attend his funeral and that he be buried in cloth given to him by Williams.

Williams knew Canonicus and his people as did few others. But unlike his fight for religious freedom, his championing of Indian rights bore little fruit. The rich, complex cultures of 1620 were by 1676 reeling from war and disease. In the end Europeans took virtually all of their lands. Roger Williams, though, played a leading role in helping these Europeans understand the first settlers of North America.

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Williams wrote the first extensive lexicon of an American Indian language
Brown University

From *The History and Antiquities of New England*, New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, 1842.



In 1675 King Philip's War erupted, with Wampanoags and Narragansetts in league against the English. After a year of the bloodiest fighting yet between Indians and colonists, the latter prevailed; Indian military and political power were broken in southeastern New England. When the English attacked a palisaded fort in the Great Swamp (above), hundreds of Narragansett men, women, and children died in the “Great Swamp Massacre.” (Below) Tobacco pipe used by New England Indians.



Library of Congress

The Wampanoag sachem Metacomb—called “King Philip” by the English—was angered by the loss of tribal lands. There

are no 17th-century images of Metacomb; this drawing is a later artist's conjecture.



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Rhode Island Historical Society

The Rev. John Eliot's 1663 translation of the Bible into an Algonquian dialect was the first of its kind. Williams made

phonetic transcriptions in the margins of his copy (left).

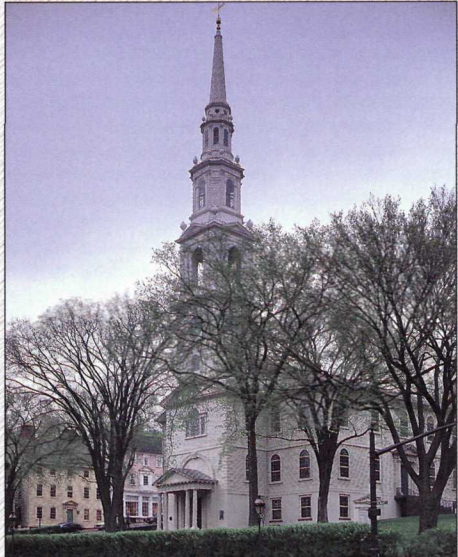
Rhode Island: Refuge for Belief

Rhode Island lived up to its charter, tolerating all forms of worship and sheltering such religious fugitives as Anne Hutchinson, a fellow exile from Massachusetts. Jewish settlers whose ancestors were expelled from Spain and Portugal in the 15th century came to Rhode Island in search of religious toleration. When some colonists questioned the Jews' right to become citizens, the General Assembly answered: “they may expect as good protection here as any stranger residing among us.” Baptists, barred from Massachusetts, were also welcome in Rhode Island. Williams himself founded the first Baptist church in North America. He stayed with the group only briefly, however, coming to believe that no earthly church could ever fit the “first and ancient pattern” of the New Testament, at least until the return of Christ.

Yet Roger Williams's belief in religious freedom should not be confused with a casual acceptance of all faiths. When he was 69, Williams rowed 30 miles from Providence to Newport for a spirited debate with Quakers.

He mistrusted a religion that relied more on “inner light” than on the New Testament. His passionate opposition to the Quakers makes it all the more significant that no Quaker in Rhode Island was ever punished for his or her religious beliefs or practices—this during a period when Massachusetts barred Quakers, hanging four of them for repeatedly returning to the colony after being expelled. The first charter for Rhode Island stated that as long as they obeyed the civil laws, all its citizens were free to “walk as their consciences persuade them.”

Williams likened Rhode Island to “many a Hundred Souls in one ship.” The captain should punish those who “refuse to obey the common laws and orders of the ship,” but “none of the Papists, Protestants, Jews, or Turks [should] be forced to come to the Ship's Prayers or Worship; nor, secondly, compelled from their own particular Prayers or Worship, if they practice any.” This compelling image defining the role of the state set the pattern for a nation.



Photograph by Paul Rezendes

The First Baptist Meeting House, near Roger Williams National Memorial, represents one of many active faiths in Providence.

Visiting Roger Williams National Memorial

Roger Williams National Memorial, on 4.5 acres, is open seven days a week, 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., except Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. Free parking is available, and the park is wheelchair accessible. Groups need to make arrangements in advance. Bernon Grove commemorates Gabriel Bernon, a 17th-century Huguenot who fled persecution in France and settled in Providence. He is buried across the street in St. John's Cathedral, which he helped

found (as King's Church). The Hahn Memorial (right) was built on land donated in the name of the first Jewish citizen of Providence to hold elected office. In the visitor center is a small exhibit on the significance of Roger Williams's life and ideas.

For More Information: write Superintendent, Roger Williams National Memorial, 282 N. Main Street, Providence, RI 02903; call 401-521-7266; visit www.nps.gov/rowi on the Internet.

Directions: From I-95 North, Exit 23, State Offices; left at light to end of Orms St.; at light, right onto Charles St.; continue straight through one light, then quick left into memorial lot. From I-95 South, Exit 23, Charles St.; first left, continue through three lights; after third light, quick left into memorial lot.

Related Sites: The First Baptist Meeting House, built in 1775, is the place of worship for the Baptist congregation organized by Williams

and others in 1638. On Prospect Terrace, a large statue of Williams marks where his remains and those of his wife Mary were reinterred in 1939. The terrace also offers an excellent view of the city. The Rhode Island State House has inscribed over its portico these words from the colony's 1663 royal charter: “To hold forth a lively experiment that a most flourishing civil state may stand and best be maintained with full liberty in religious concerns.”



NPS Photograph

The Hahn Memorial's symbolic well marks the location of a 17th-century spring. Discovered by Roger Williams, this source of fresh water sustained the new settlement on the bank of the saltwater cove.