

THE LIVELY EXPERIMENT: ROGER WILLIAMS, RHODE ISLAND, AND  
RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

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by

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## ABSTRACT

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In 1636, Roger Williams established the colony of Providence. He did so with the goal of creating a safe-haven for those who were persecuted due to their religious beliefs. It was his desire to construct a functioning society in which people were free to live out their spiritual ideas with no governmental oversight or interference. In order to accomplish this goal, Williams called for the strict and total separation of church and state. Religion and the English government had always been closely entwined and reliant on one another other as a source of power, prestige, and authority. It was the accepted way of English life that church and government be connected. Therefore, what Williams was attempting to build in Providence was shockingly radical and met with much resistance and disdain.

Through analyzing Williams' journey in establishing what would become Rhode Island, a deeper appreciation and understanding is formed as to the crucial nature of Williams in cementing the religious autonomy that is so precious to the American character. When studied, his personal words and actions illustrate how his progressive philosophies and notions of soul-based liberty profoundly shaped the American concept of religious freedom. His choice to boldly create Rhode Island, even in the face of great adversity and personal sacrifice, would serve as an example to the world that a civil society could thrive outside of the bounds of compelled uniformed religion.

KEY WORDS: Roger Williams, Rhode Island, Religious freedom, Colonial America.

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## PREFACE

Roger Williams had an extraordinary way with words. He was very passionate about Rhode Island and the liberation of the religiously persecuted. This fervent passion was very evident in his writings, especially in his treatise *The Bloudy Tenent*. In order to get his passionate point across, however, his works often contained bold statements, capitalized declarations, punctuation for emphasis, and non-traditional usage of words. His liberal writing style, in conjunction with the antiquated spelling of the 1600's, makes some his works difficult to follow.

However, I have largely chosen to leave the original spelling and grammar intact. I really wanted to accurately portray the original source material and allow readers to experience the passion that I feel comes through in his writing. I have combatted some of the possible confusion by breaking up his statements, explicating them, and placing them in the correct context. Williams was truly a master at argumentative writing, and the extra flourishes he added (while not grammatically sound), were a deliberate choice and an important aspect of his unique style. To fully update his words would be to strip his writing of its distinct character and historical significance.

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## CHAPTER I

### Early Life

Rhode Island is the smallest state in America. It is positioned on the east coast, amongst some of the most historic, prestigious, and notable sites in the country. It is by no means one of the more renowned or ostentatious states. Beyond the mundane exterior, however, beats a history rich in political and religious strife and groundbreaking freedom. Its founder Roger Williams overcame governmental turmoil and animosity, personal persecution, and the pangs of progress in order to make Rhode Island the first religiously free society in the world. This is his story, the story of Rhode Island and the creation of *soul liberty*.

Before Roger Williams ever set foot in America, he called England his home. For the first twenty-seven years of his life, he was an average working-class London based Englishman. From growing up during a time of great religious and political strife, to cultivating his Puritan belief system, to leaning into the intellectual and liberal influences of Sir Edward Coke and Sir Francis Bacon, Williams was profoundly shaped and deeply inspired during the early years of his life. Everything that happened to him in England—every experience, every new encounter, every hard learned lesson, every triumph, and every tragedy would prepare and fortify him for the extraordinary life he would lead in America.

Roger Williams' exact birthdate has been disputed over the years, as any records of his birth and baptism were destroyed in the Great London Fire of 1666. The most

accepted and referenced date however is 1603.<sup>1</sup> Williams was born to James and Alice Williams, and raised in a northwestern section of London called Smithfield. In his early years he and his family were patrons of their local Holy Church of St. Sepulchre where Puritan minister, John Spenser, delivered sermons and scriptures to the community. It is highly likely that Williams received his initial education from the St. Sepulchre School, which heavily emphasized religious readings, Latin studies, and proper English grammar.<sup>2</sup>

Williams indicated later in life that he had been exposed to a variety of religious viewpoints and perspectives during his youth. With London being a very dynamic and transient city, he had the opportunity to come in casual or unintentional contact with many individuals of differing religious backgrounds. He also had a natural curiosity about spirituality that led him to actively seek information on other faiths and ways of life. He stated that his native country had provided him with the chance to converse with “Turks, Jews, Papists, and all sorts of Protestants, and by books know the affairs and religions of all countries.”<sup>3</sup> This initial exposure to religious diversity, while not common for Puritans, nurtured in him a foundational understanding that there existed more than one way to experience and pursue spirituality.

Though Williams’ personal life growing up may have been stable, he was born during an extended period of political and religious turmoil in England. The events that

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<sup>1</sup> John M. Barry, *The Creation of the American Soul: Roger Williams, Church and State, and the Birth of Liberty* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2012), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Alan E. Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience* (Pittsburgh, PA: Philosophia Publications, 2015), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 6.



occurred prior to his birth and shortly after profoundly shaped the English nation, setting them up for years of domestic and foreign faith-based aggression. Eventually culminating in full scale English Civil Wars. The constant waging of wars over religious friction illustrated to Williams from an early age the volatile nature of religion and the inherent danger of tightly coiling spirituality with politics.

King Henry VIII had broken with the Roman Catholic Church in 1534, declaring himself the head of the Church of England. While Henry had severed England's official ties to the Catholic Church and relegated the pope beneath himself, he continued many of the Catholic doctrines, practices, and rituals. Henry was succeeded by his Protestant son Edward VI, who met an untimely end at the age of fifteen. Following Edward was Lady Jane Grey, another Protestant ruler, whose de facto reign lasted nine days.

In 1553, Mary I became Queen of England. As a staunch Catholic, Mary desperately wanted to return England to the Catholic faith. She ruthlessly hunted and prosecuted Protestants, earning her the name of *Bloody Mary*. Mary's bloody reign came to an end when she died in 1588. Her sister, Elizabeth I, ascended to the throne after her. Elizabeth claimed the throne and effectively reversed Mary's Catholic sentiments. Like her father, however, Elizabeth wished to retain many Catholic traditions: "This became a point of contention between the Queen's established Church of England and a rising group of Protestants who were called, at first pejoratively, Puritans."<sup>4</sup> The Puritans were on a faith based mission to purify the Church of England of any remnants of Catholic teachings.

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<sup>4</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 3.

In an effort to calm rising tensions Elizabeth instructed Parliament to pass an Act of Uniformity in 1558. This act required all churches to utilize the Book of Common Prayers, outlawed public degradation of the book, and ordered compulsory attendance at the governmental Church of England on Sundays. The violation of any of these orders would result in fines and prison sentences.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the intention, the act did nothing to calm brewing tensions. The pope in Rome, along with the Catholic Spanish, refused to accept the Church of England's relegation of the Catholic faith or of the pope's authority. The result was full scale torment and persecution of Catholics residing in England, as well as the formulation of a plan to overthrow Queen Elizabeth by the Spanish.

Much of the strain and mutual wrath between the Church of England and the Catholics came to a point when the enacted plot to oust Elizabeth resulted in the Spanish Armada. With the help of inclement weather, the English navy dispelled the Spanish fleets and declared victory over Catholic Spain. The English seized the opportunity to reinforce the eminence and God given favor of The Church of England: "The English government attributed the victory solely to God in an attempt, very influential in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, to demonstrate that God was on the side of English Parasitism."<sup>6</sup> This bolstered the English government's confidence in reinforcing the authority of the Church of England, which meant an escalation in the persecution of Puritans who did not conform.

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<sup>5</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 1-4

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 5.

The ascension of James I in 1603 saw the continuation of a Protestant ruler. James, much like Elizabeth, persistently dealt with combative religious concerns during his reign. The disparities and qualms held between the Puritans and The Church of England had steadily escalated, bringing about a time of great oppression, persecution, and unrest for the Puritan communities living in England. It is during this time, with King James on the throne and Puritan discontent intensifying, that Williams experienced his formative years.<sup>7</sup>

Through his studies at the St. Sepulchre School, Williams cultivated a talent for writing shorthand. This talent attracted the attention of Sir Edward Coke, a notable scholar, lawyer, jurist, and parliamentarian. Coke employed Williams to take shorthand notes for him at judicial proceedings. This small role soon formed into a full apprenticeship for Williams, who between 1617 and 1621, was able to closely study the practice of law under one of the brightest legal minds in history.<sup>8</sup>

Coke grew to hold a firm fondness for Williams, whom he gladly mentored in his early years. In a letter that Coke's daughter, Anne Sadlier, wrote in 1652 she reinforced just how much her father cared for Williams. In it she explained that her father even went so far as to enroll Williams in a school where he could further his education and accumulate more knowledge: "My dear father, he seeing him so hopeful a youth, took such a liking to him that he put him in Suttons Hospital."<sup>9</sup> At Suttons, which served

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<sup>7</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 30.

<sup>9</sup> Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Master Roger Williams, a Biography* (New York: Octagon Books, 1973), 45.

primarily as a primary school for middleclass boys, Williams rigorously studied Latin, Greek, rhetoric, and religion.

Williams very much reciprocated the affection that Coke shared, referring to Coke as a “much honored friend, that man of honor, and wisdom, and piety.”<sup>10</sup> The warm relationship that Williams cultivated with Coke would serve as a great personal and professional influence to him as he furthered his studies and built up his own career: “Coke’s work and life exposed Williams to a deep understanding of state power, individual rights, and of the law, not simply practiced in the courtroom but as it defined the infrastructure of society.”<sup>11</sup>

Coke held an impressive resume by the time he collected young Williams. Every job he undertook he seemed to do so with vigor, never settling for just completing the bare requirements of the task. His ambition propelled him to always expand upon situations and opportunities in a progressive and unique way. This led him to set legal precedents that are still apart of modern jurisprudence, most notably the notion that the judiciary is an independent branch of government that may overturn unlawful statutes. He also put in place high standards for the responsibilities of the various important positions that he came to fill in the government. He undertook and in many ways defined the roles of Speaker of the House of Commons, solicitor general, attorney general, and chief justice for the Court of Common Pleas and the King’s Bench.

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<sup>10</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 32.

<sup>11</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 8.

As a scholar, his great goal was to effectively dismantle centuries of archaic common law practices. Not through legislation, but through setting new legal precedents that would be upheld for generations to come. He dedicated a lot of his time to this pursuit, studying legal documents that dated back to the 1300's. His work was not in vain, as many legal scholars and acting attorneys came to depend on his research and apply it to the real world. As a judge, he set legal standards and precedents that would alone historically establish him as a great legal figure. Many of his rulings were borrowed from or served as a source of inspiration for future American cases, such as *Marbury vs Madison*, which established judicial review.

However, in the midst of all of his grand accomplishments, what is truly remembered most about Coke is the resolute stance he took for liberty. At a time when individual freedoms and rights were considered an abstract and elusive concept, Coke dared to speak out against governmental oppression in favor of liberty. He famously sparred with King James on multiple occasions about the abusive power of the crown and the corruption of the government.

One such occasion occurred when Coke fought against the Archbishop Bancroft, who urged the king to settle a case that was in dispute between himself and the judges. Bancroft maintained that the judges were mere delegates of the crown, which would make it permissible for James to draw the case out of the court system and decide the matter for himself. James insisted that the law was founded on reason and that he possessed as much reason as the judges, which would qualify him to make the final ruling. Coke countered however with the argument that law was not founded on natural reason alone, but also artificial reason that could only be mastered through formal

education and years of experience that the king did not possess. This angered the king, who in response lashed out at Coke and continued to claim jurisdiction over legal matters.<sup>12</sup>

He later sparred with the king again when James wanted to ban all nonconformists from being within ten miles of the palace and force upon every citizen an oath of allegiance. Coke stated: “The law of England is divided into three parts, Common Law, Statue Law, and Custom. But the king’s proclamation is none of them.”<sup>13</sup> He argued so convincingly that the judges made a rare stance against the king, rebuffing him and agreeing with Coke.

While exchanges like these enraged the king, Coke did not easily back away from his positions. He had grown to be a larger than life figure in English society, which emboldened him to not share the fear that most men, even other prominent men, felt when it came to challenging the king. He understood his value and his irreplaceable nature, as did James. To detrimentally silence Coke would be to lose his superior intellect, his influence, and his remarkable list of resources and contacts, all of which James relied on and enjoyed calling upon for both personal and governmental use.<sup>14</sup>

James would finally come to make a stance against Coke with the encouragement and enabling of a man who would too come to leave an impression on the young and

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<sup>12</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 40-44.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Coke, *The Selected Writings and Speeches of Sir Edward Coke*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2003) 489.

<sup>14</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 46.

malleable Williams. He was calculating, tenacious, and capable of rivaling Coke in intelligence, political maneuvering, and appetite for control. His name was Sir Francis Bacon.

Unlike Coke, who was legal enthusiast, his personal interests lay more in the realm of science: “Bacon’s chief legacy lay in his contributions to scientific methodology, on the way people think rather than what they think.”<sup>15</sup> Bacon was first spotted for his aptitude by Queen Elizabeth when he was not yet a teenager, as his intellect and speech were well advanced. He entered Cambridge at the age of twelve, but failed to launch a hugely successful career out of it. Though he was born into a privileged position, he pretty quickly burned through his inheritance and was left with a debt that he could not begin to pay off. This eventually sent him to debtor’s prison. As Bacon struggled to climb out of debt and obscurity, he came in contact with Coke.

Coke and Bacon would come to rival one another on a multitude of occasions. They initially competed against one another in court when Bacon represented the nephew of Thomas Sutton. Sutton’s uncle was one of the wealthiest men in London. Upon his death, he left his entire fortune to the establishment of a school for middleclass boys. The same school that Williams would later attend. Bacon’s client contested the will, laying claim to his uncle’s fortune. Coke represented the interests of the school however and won. This loss deprived Bacon of a huge legal fee, and would serve as the first of several altercations between the two.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 48.

<sup>16</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 50.

Perhaps the most personal altercation between the two occurred when Bacon and Coke both competed for the hand of the young and extremely wealthy Elizabeth Hatton. While Coke did not need the money or notoriety that would come with Hatton, a marriage to Hatton for Bacon would be huge financial and social gain for him. As with the trial though, Bacon lost to Coke. Not ready to give up on his ideas of grandeur yet, Bacon sought to attach himself to prominent men in court to help him rise from anonymity.

Robert Devereux the Earl of Essex was who Bacon picked to adhere himself to. This attachment did fortify him and allow for his social standing to improve. Devereux helped secure several court positions that brought him some much needed income, as well as a marriage to the daughter of a prominent London alderman. This link would prove detrimental however when Devereux dared to rebel against Queen Elizabeth. Coke was charged with prosecuting Devereux, which resulted in him being hanged. In order to save himself from lethal legal actions, Bacon wrote a letter that severed his ties to Devereux.<sup>17</sup>

After the death of Queen Elizabeth, Bacon found favor with the Duke of Buckingham, who was the long-held favorite of King James. This attachment allowed him to flourish in the court of King James. Bacon rallied to James' side, advocating for an expansion of the power of the crown. Bacon continued to cultivate good favor with James, encouraging his use of authority and patiently waiting for an opportunity to

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid



advance into a high ranking position. When a vacancy came up on the court of the King's Bench, Bacon saw his opening to both exact revenge on Coke and elevate himself.

Bacon strongly advised the king to remove Coke from the Court of Common Pleas and instead place him on the King's Bench. This would limit the reach of Coke's influence, as well as his income. Going further though, Bacon suggested that James place the current attorney general in the Common Pleas position and appoint him as attorney general. Bacon contended that these changes would "recover that strength due to the King's prerogative which it hath had in past times."<sup>18</sup> James headed this advice, which finally afforded Bacon with the upper-class status that he had sought for so long.

Bacon did not stop there however, he continued to wedge a gap between James and Coke; all while securing more power and prestige for himself. After some lofty convincing, James agreed to have Coke step down from being a chief justice. Falling out of grace with James was a low blow for Coke. Not long after this, James appointed Bacon to be Lord Chancellor of England, Lord Keeper of the Great Seal of England. He was now second only to the king.<sup>19</sup>

Despite Bacon's desire to expel Coke from public life, Coke did not stay out of the king's good favor for long. With the calculated marriage of Coke's beautiful daughter to Buckingham's older brother, Coke earned his way back into the king's good graces and was once again on his privy council. Bacon tried to stop this marriage, as he knew

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<sup>18</sup>Francis Bacon, *The Works of Francis Bacon, Lord Chancellor England*, (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1842), 166.

<sup>19</sup>Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 56.

how lucrative it was to form a connection to Buckingham (after all, this was how he got his start in James' court) and he also understood that the king already had a soft spot for Coke. Even with his best efforts though, the marriage went on and pleased both Buckingham and the king. It is during this time, with Coke regaining his approval and position with James, that Williams began his apprenticeship.

Williams was from a middleclass background. His father was a merchant in the textile industry and provided a fairly steady income for his family. Smithfield was not in the center of London, but was still central enough that he was could observe the action of the city. The only time Williams ever referenced his family and childhood in later writings was to say that he felt "persecuted" in his father's house.<sup>20</sup> This leads one to believe that he did not have the happiest of upbringings. The opportunity to work for Coke then must have been a welcome reprieve from the circumstances of Smithfield.

It is not entirely clear why Coke shared such affection for Williams. However, he did not have the best relationships with his own children. They had achieved little in life and were constantly in financial and legal trouble. He did not even keep in contact with most of his eight children. It is entirely possible that Coke saw Williams as a way to compensate for the utter disappointment he felt towards his own children. Whatever the case, whether it be compensation, Christian charity, benevolence, or him seeing raw potential, Coke took on Williams with an uncharacteristic devotion and profoundly shaped his perception of life.

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<sup>20</sup> Roger Williams, *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*, (Hanover: Brown University Press, 1988), 11.

Through his time with Coke, Williams was given an exhilarating view of the inner workings of the government, the crown, and the broader legal system. He would silently accompany Coke to court, the Star Chamber, the Privy Council, and even gatherings with the king. It was an education better than any he could ever receive in school. He did not just simply study Coke, he observed him working first hand and absorbed every word he spoke, every action he took, and every choice he made: “Williams breathed Coke and lived Coke. His lessons were not something studied they were lived.”<sup>21</sup>

Coke and Williams would eventually part in 1621. After years of being Coke’s faithful companion and most dedicated pupil, it was time for Williams to continue his formal education and move forward with his own personal goals. With the help of Coke, Williams began school at Suttons. During their time of parting, Coke angered James and was sentenced to nine months in the Tower of London. Coke had suggested bold legislation that would allow the council to assess parliamentary rights without requiring the consent of the king. He was held for treason, but eventually released due to lack of proper evidence or perhaps sympathetic authorities. This arrest marked the last phase of Coke’s career, but the beginning of young Williams’.

Though Williams was now receiving a proper education, he had truly received an education more valuable than what could be taught in books from Coke and Bacon. He had an intimate view of the brightest legal mind and the boldest thinker of the time. He watched “the two circle each other warily and with sinister intent.”<sup>22</sup> He witnessed court proceedings, read important documents, transcribed the very words spoken by the most

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<sup>21</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 61.

<sup>22</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 81.

intelligent people in England, and saw Coke brazenly hold his ground as he confronted the king, eventually going to prison for it.

The influence that Coke had on Williams cannot be understated. Through his work, his philosophies, his actions, and the way he outwardly lived his life Coke molded Williams' mind, constantly challenging him and giving him an example to follow. He instilled in Williams a shameless respect for the law of men, a disgust and distrust for absolutism, an appreciation for the crucial nature of logic and reason, and above all, the courage one must have in their convictions. Williams would later recall the "the many thousand times" that he would revisit all that Coke had taught him, "the writings, the speeches, and the example of that glorious light."<sup>23</sup>

Though Williams deeply valued Coke and all that he had done for him, he never gave him blind loyalty or exclusiveness. For it was not just Coke that left a lasting influence on him, but also his nemesis Bacon as well. Even if Williams fundamentally disagreed with Bacon's stance on politics and the power dynamic of the crown, he still learned a lot from being in his presence and reading his scientific works. While in politics and law Bacon relied heavily on the authority of the king, in the realm of science he rejected classic authorities and accepted facts in favor of fresh observation and experimentation.

He challenged Williams to not just recklessly accept the assumptions of the past, but to observe the world with fresh and critical eyes: "Bacon taught the difference between reasoning and thinking, between using one's mind to advocate and using it to

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<sup>23</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 9.

understand, between assembling evidence with an end in mind and allowing evidence to discover a direction.”<sup>24</sup> Bacon was not afraid to discard even the most cemented facts if new evidence led him to different conclusions. This boldness to think beyond what was known and recognized would stay with Williams for the rest of his life.

In his own unique way, Williams would come to exceed even Bacon in his willingness to confront the flawed and unsubstantiated beliefs of the past. He would dare to not only envision a new way of thinking, but to create a place in which this thinking had the opportunity to either falter or flourish. Williams would take the essential lessons and philosophies he learned from both Coke and Bacon and form his own distinctive outlook on life: “From both of these men and all the world around them— Williams derived his own path, his own view of state, of law, of politics, and of the role of religion in the state.”<sup>25</sup>

While Williams pursued his education at Suttons and later Cambridge, King James passed away in 1625. His son Charles would succeed him on the throne, kicking up any settled dirt when it came to concerns about religion. Charles would come to be unpopular amongst Protestants and Puritans. He planted the seeds of mistrust very early in his reign when he wed the Catholic princess Henrietta Maria and began to push The Church of England to be more and more Catholic in practice. Puritans, who felt that there were already too many Catholic fragments in the church, became increasingly agitated

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<sup>24</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 83.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

and resistant. They feared what would become of the church now that it was controlled by a clear Catholic sympathizer.

Charles began to purge dissidents from The Church of England, feeling strongly that Puritans specifically would corrupt the church. Referring to Puritans as “enemies of Kings,” he set in place policies and procedures that targeted them directly.<sup>26</sup> It was during this time that he named William Laud as Archbishop of Canterbury. Laud, who was a staunch supporter of Charles’ push for power within the church, now held a lot of authority and influence over The Church of England. He began by instituting a law that anyone obtaining a higher degree must swear conformity to The Church of England.

This came to directly affect Williams, as he was studying at Cambridge. Rather than agree to conform and publically abandon his Puritan beliefs, Williams withdrew from Cambridge and sought a post as a private family clergy with Sir William Masham in Essex. Masham was a very important man in Essex and a member of a Puritan faction in Parliament that opposed the oppression seen from Laud and the king. Essex in general was a hub for Puritans, as more lived there than any other county in England. Williams, now living in a Puritan centric community and working for Masham, became involved in the Puritan movement.<sup>27</sup>

Beyond his duties as a private clergy, Williams served as a courier for Masham and his family, friends, and allies in Essex. He would accompany Masham to London and

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<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Scott, *England's Troubles: Seventeenth-Century English Political Instability in European Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 117.

<sup>27</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 103-104.

frequently travel back to Essex to deliver news and crucial information on the developing political situation. Masham enjoyed having Williams in his company as he benefited from his knowledge of law and politics, as well as any past connections he had from his time with Coke. Williams witnessed firsthand the tightening of Charles' grasp on the Puritan population of England.

Charles, with the assistance of Bishop Laud, became more and more ruthless and determined to force Puritans into either conforming or drawing them out into the public to be excised. Despite the best efforts of people like Masham, the tide was not turning in favor of the Puritans anytime soon. It was during this time that many Puritans began to plan an escape to America. Following the example set by William Bradford and the Puritans aboard the Mayflower, many saw America as a chance to escape the persecution they faced at home and still be able to maintain their English status. John Winthrop, being elected governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, would lead the first major wave of Puritans arriving in New England in 1630.

For Williams, he committed himself to staying in England as long as liberty afforded him some peace. His private chaplaincy with the Masham family had provided him with security not afforded to most Puritan clergy. He was effectively shielded from wearing a surplice, from making the sign of the cross, from using The Book of Common Prayers, and from generally yielding to any of Laud's authoritative requirements. But this

shield was quickly evaporating around him. Laud was well aware of the loophole surrounding private chaplains and actively sought to close it.<sup>28</sup>

Laud requested that Charles procure a list of all private chaplains so that he could launch investigations into them, further purging England of nonconformists. Williams realistically knew that he would not survive his investigation. Clergy far more moderate and willing to compromise than him were being drawn out and punished. Many were forced to pay heavy fines, costing them their saving and livelihoods. Others were thrown into prison, which forced them to endure starvation, deplorable conditions, and even mutilation. Williams, knowing that he was not on the modest end of Puritan practices, feared that he would receive the more severe end of sentencing.

Williams received word that Laud and the High Commission were preparing to turn their attention to him in late November 1630. Many in a similar position had fled to Holland, but Williams knew that Catholic armies would soon be breaching Holland. He also learned from reports by William Bradford and those who had lived in Holland before boarding the Mayflower that the Dutch way of life was not befitting to an Englishman. As such, Holland held no appeal to Williams, but the promise of liberty in America did.

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He understood Winthrop's mission and knew of the grand plans to create safe haven for Puritans, a shining example for the rest of world to behold. Far from the

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<sup>28</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 196-197.

<sup>29</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 199.



persecution and religious struggles of home, Massachusetts would be a place to reflect God's peace and glory. With his wife Mary (whom was a maid in the Masham house that he had been married to less than a year) and the few belongs he had the time to gather, he set off to the port in Bristol to secure passage to America as part of the flood of Puritans absconding to the New World, later known as the Great Migration.

Though he was hopeful about his future in the New World, leaving his home was nonetheless devastatingly difficult. He would recount later that leaving England "was as bitter as death." He also spoke about the difficulty of passing the home in which Coke lived: "It was also bitter as death to me when I rode Windsor way to take ship at Bristow, and saw Stoke-House where that blessed man was."<sup>30</sup> As Coke was involved with the High Church, Williams knew that it would be problematic to say the least if he tried to contact him before departing. So instead he silently sailed away, fully understanding that he would never see the man who had enriched his life so much ever again. Coke would pass away four years later at the age of 82.

Williams had no delusions that the voyage or life in America would be easy or carefree. He knew of the dangers of the long journey across the Atlantic and had heard plenty of reports about the crushing death and despair experienced by those who had gone before him. But to be completely free to be all that God intended, to be able to worship and live in a community of likeminded individuals, and to never have to fear being oppressed for his faith was worth the risk and sacrifice. On December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1630

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<sup>30</sup>Roger Williams, *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*, 358.

Williams and Mary boarded the Lyon, bracing themselves for the cold and unforgiving midwinter journey, bound for their new life in America.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 11.

## CHAPTER II

### The New World

Williams made the voyage to the New World during the winter months, which made the already dangerous journey all the more treacherous and unpredictable. The frigid weather, unforgiving storms, and icy conditions made it a perilous expedition that few captains and even fewer travelers would attempt. However, desperation drove both Pierce, master of the *Lyon*, and Williams to risk the fatal consequences of the journey. While Pierce was on a mission from John Winthrop to return with fresh supplies for the depleted Bay Colony, Williams was on a mission to escape his likely imprisonment in England.

Life aboard the *Lyon* for Williams and the small handful of other passengers was horrendous. They lived in cramped quarters below deck with a variety of livestock, which made for foul and unclean conditions. Freezing winds passed through the planks and boards of the ship and sent slivers of ice into the skin of anyone on deck. Ice coated the wooden surfaces and rigging, making slipping off the ship a real anxiety. Wave after wave relentlessly and violently crashed into the ship, causing all manner of concerning movement and creaking.<sup>32</sup>

After a long and treacherous sixty-six days, the *Lyon* docked safely in Boston harbor on February 5, 1631. Williams had been hard at work networking before he even stepped foot in America. For on the *Lyon* with him was John Winthrop's wife and son.

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<sup>32</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 203.

He was able to speak with them and bond over the dreadful voyage, which in addition to the positive opinions that Winthrop already had of him, provided Williams with a promising start in the Bay Colony. In Winthrop's journal, before mentioning the arrival of his family or the much needed supplies, he noted how thankful he was that such a "godly minister" had come.<sup>33</sup> This illustrates just how big of a priority religion was for Winthrop.

The Bay Colony had been founded a year prior, in 1630. John Winthrop (who was the governor of the colony) and a thousand Puritan refugees made the journey across the Atlantic in order to escape oppression and start a new life. The Puritans who ventured to the Bay Colony found a bold and passionate leader in Winthrop. His dedication to fulfilling the mission that he believed God called him and his colony to was unwavering.

Winthrop was born in 1588 as part of the gentry. This was a privileged position that enabled him to attend Trinity College and later Cambridge. He was primarily a squire at Groton, but came to hold a government position when he served as a justice of the peace. He showed an early interest in theology, eventually accepting the Puritan doctrine and believing himself to be part of the elect— chosen for salvation and sainthood. He became highly devout, dedicating his life to deepening his spiritual journey. When King Charles' anti-Puritan policies began to affect him on a personal and professional level, he decided to join the Massachusetts Bay Company and plant a colony

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<sup>33</sup> Francis J. Bremer, *John Winthrop: America's Forgotten Founding Father* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 194.

in America. He collected a large group of Puritans who felt spiritually stifled and who were tired of being persecuted for their faith, and set off to the New World.<sup>34</sup>

Winthrop envisioned a community of likeminded believers coming together and living an exceptional life for the glory of God. He wanted the Bay Colony to shine as an example of what a Puritan society could accomplish for the heavenly kingdom, as well as king and country. Winthrop firmly set this expectation, challenging every Puritan bound for the New World to rise to this standard of spiritual exceptionalism. In the now famous sermon that he delivered in route to America, *A Model of Christian Charity*, he implored those with him on this journey to accept the responsibility of the task that lay ahead: “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.”<sup>35</sup>

Theologically, Puritans as a whole, believed that it was crucial to be in a covenant relationship with God. They held that it was only through sermons, a strict interpretation of the Bible, and the energizing presence of the Holy Spirit that one could be redeemed from their sinful nature. Heavily influenced by Calvinist teachings, Puritans adopted the idea of double predestination, which fostered the belief that they were the elect chosen by God to live pious lives on an individual and community level. This strongly held conviction that living strictly dogmatic and pure lives would cleanse their wicked nature

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Parker. *John Winthrop: Founding the City upon a Hill*. (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), 3-18.

<sup>35</sup> John Winthrop. *A Model of Christian Charity*, (Boston: Hanover Historical Texts Collection, 1996), 47.

and illustrate to the world that they were in fact divinely chosen by God for salvation certainly influenced how the Bay Colony would function as a community.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to religious principles and creeds, Winthrop and the Bay colonists would also be inspired to shape their community by their newly found freedom and authority. Puritans felt it was their true calling to reform and cleanse society of its corrupt ways. In England, they were very restricted on how they could accomplish this mission. They sought to impart and model pure and godly lives, hoping that by exemplifying wholesome behavior others would be persuaded to follow the path of virtue. In America however, they could extend their influence far beyond merely exhibiting reverent lives: “When Puritans achieved political power— in the American colonies they established and in England following the Civil Wars of the 1640’s— they were able to employ instruments of power as well as those of persuasion.”<sup>37</sup>

In finally garnering the power to mold their ideal Puritan society, Winthrop and other Bay leaders found themselves for the first time able to exert their religious preferences through social and political pressure over a large number of people. This was the opportunity that they had dreamed of and they were committed to seeing it through. As the stability of the colony increased however, those who led it grew increasingly bold in what they required of those who lived in their unspoiled Puritan society. They also

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<sup>36</sup> Francis Bremer, *Puritanism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1-2.

<sup>37</sup> Francis Bremer, *Puritanism: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

became increasingly intolerant to outside religious perspectives and influences. This was the Puritan community that Williams would eventually spar with in America.

The Bay Colony was desperately in need of supplies and reinforcements by the time the Lyon docked. Though they were fervent about their religious mission and excited to bring it to fruition, it had not been an easy transition into the New World for the colony. Starvation and death due to disease and exposure to the elements were not uncommon. With simple structures for shelter, the lacking of basic essential items, and little to no food, it was a bare and brutal way to exist. Thomas Dudley, the Deputy Governor of the Bay Colony, warned his friends in England against joining him in America: “We yet enjoy little to be envied but endure much to be pitied.... [I]f any come hither that can live well at home, he commits an error, of which he will soon repent him.”

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In 1630 a thousand hopeful and enthusiastic Puritans made the voyage. In 1631, less than a hundred ventured away from England. Only the truly fraught and desperate were willing to endure the assured dreadful life of the Bay Colony. Yet, despite all of the lows, the Bay Colony was slowly adapting to their new environment. They were in the process of constructing more permanent buildings, they were (unlike the previous year) planting seeds that would yield a plentiful harvest, and they were learning to live off the land through fishing, fur trading, hunting, logging, and ship construction.

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas Dudley, *Tracts and Other Papers Relating Principally to the Origin, Settlement, and Progress of the Colonies in North America, From the Discovery of the Country to the Year 1776*, (Washington DC: Peter Force, 1836), 237.

The colonists were gradually learning how to navigate their new surroundings. The different ecology, the Native inhabitants, and the crude conditions were all new experiences that they had no preparation in facing. They were slowly embracing the bounty that America could offer through hard work and perseverance, however. The vast and striking wilderness, the endless possibilities, and the raw promise of a better future could not be experienced anywhere in Europe. But in America, it was the reality they awoke to everyday. Most importantly though, they were able to pursue their faith with all of their might; always remaining vigilant in the pursuit of God's purpose for the colony. Much of the focus was still on surviving instead of thriving, but progress and improvements was being made with each passing day: "This was the world which Williams entered, a world of hardship but hardship limned with promise."<sup>39</sup>

Upon his arrival, Williams quickly became a very sought-after guest. While some knew only of his impressive reputation, others distinctly remember him from their time in England. Just two years prior leaders from the Bay Colony had attempted to convince him to join them on their endeavor in America. He of course turned them down, which made it a lovely surprise then that circumstances would lead him to America after all. Williams was also among the first new faces they had seen in months. They felt completely cut off from their previous life and were anxious for the latest news and stories, especially coming from a man that they knew was very much involved in the Puritan movement and politics of home.

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<sup>39</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 206.



As nice and welcoming as this reception was, he knew that he could not ride on being an exciting new face forever. He needed to find a way to make a living for himself and his wife. Armed with only his academic training, a collection of books, and no practical skills or resources, he needed an occupation tailored to his abilities to open and fast. This was a lot to expect when academic outlets were few and far between at this point. Luckily for him, just the opportunity came open when the minister at the Boston church, John Wilson, announced that he was leaving for England to fetch his family. He would be back eventually, but his absence would leave the church in a predicament.<sup>40</sup>

The leaders at the Boston church decided without much debate that they would appoint Williams to be their teacher or theologian. This was a different position than the formal minister, which meant that Wilson's job would still be his if and when he returned. This was a career of immense importance to entrust to such a young man. In a community where religion was the crux of their existence, religious leaders held a prominent and authoritative place in society. In this position he would be more than just a minister or educator. He would hold vast influence over the creation and order of the new Puritan culture and society that Bay leaders were seeking to cultivate.

In Europe they were either persecuted for their beliefs or restrained in how much of an impact they could make on the pre-existing culture around them. In America however, they were given a blank slate and full control. They would be able to create for the first time a fully functioning Puritan society with no limitations or competing influences. Even though this was truly a once in a lifetime chance, Williams did not

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<sup>40</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 21.

readily accept the offer like he was expected to. Instead he decided to meet with the leaders of the Boston church before he would commit to the post. He wanted to learn more about them and their practices, and after he did, he turned down the post.

He explained: “I durst not officiate to an unseparated people.”<sup>41</sup> His response sent palpable shockwaves throughout the colony. The most powerful and influential men in the colony had asked him to join them, to be one of them and to take part in shaping Bay Colony, and he not only refused their offer, but he pointed out faults and errors in their ways. Williams believed that the Boston church (and by proxy the Bay Colony) clung to the Church of England and their teachings too much still. He sought a complete parting from the English church. That is why he came to America, to be out of reach of Laud and to not have to live by any of the Church of England’s dictations.

Winthrop and the majority of the Bay Colony agreed that the Church of England had been corrupted and defiled, that is why they were Puritans after all. However, they felt that it was too radical to completely break from the church. They wanted to correct and purify the church’s teachings, not abandon them completely. Williams differed from the Bay Colony on this point, as he was not just a Puritan, but also a passionate Separatist: “A Separatist was a Puritan who had asked a simple question and arrived at a disruptive answer. The question was, is the Church of England a true church?”<sup>42</sup> Upon examining the church and asking himself this question, he arrived at the answer of no.

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<sup>41</sup> Roger Williams, *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams: Volume 6* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), 356.

<sup>42</sup> Timothy L. Hall, *Separating Church and State: Roger Williams and Religious Liberty* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 19.

Williams, like other Separatists, believed that the Church of England was not a true church in that its very nature became permanently corrupted after Mary Tudor all but offered it up to Rome during her brief and bloody reign. This had left the church irrevocably tainted by Roman Catholicism, not even returning the church to Protestantism under Elizabeth could correct the deep-rooted stains of Catholicism. While Puritans believed that they could amend the church's past, Separatists felt this was not the case. The damage had been done and could not be repaired.

Aside from the corruption of Catholicism, Separatists also found fault in the church's inclusiveness. To be English was to automatically be a member of the Church of England. This policy opened the church up to people who were not true followers of the church or even God, but rather just citizens who attended service by edict of being English. This marred the church with impurity to Separatists like Williams, who felt that church membership should be limited to true followers of the faith: "He believed a true church was a community consisting solely of true believers, not just simply church attenders and their children, but people who had been 'born again' by the power of Christ." <sup>43</sup>

Going one step beyond criticizing their ties to the Church of England, Williams criticized Winthrop's use of magistrates to enforce the first four orders of the Ten Commandments, which was referred to as The First Table. The First Table regulated human duty to God and required people of faith to have no other Gods, make no graven images, not speak the Lord's name in vain, and keep the Sabbath holy. Williams asserted

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<sup>43</sup> Hall, *Separating Church and State: Roger Williams and Religious Liberty*, 20.

that these were crucial elements of faith, but that they lay outside the purview of government: “The state, he said, had no authority to inject itself in any way into an individual’s relationship with God.”<sup>44</sup>

Williams’ assertion that The First Table should not be enforced by government was far more than just a critique of Massachusetts’ government. In England and other parts of Europe as well, magistrates also enforced the decrees of the first four commandments. It was common practice for individuals to be fined for not attending church, for blasphemers to be punished, and for heretics to have their ears cut off, their tongues boarded, or to be imprisoned indefinitely. This was the way of the world, not just in Massachusetts, but across the Atlantic as well. For Williams to suggest that this was incorrect was scandalous and insulting.

The Second Table, which regulated human relations and forbade murder, theft, adultery, lying, and greed, was what the government should concern itself with according to Williams. Winthrop wrote a journal entry that expressed his concern over Williams refuting the Boston Church, as well as his drastic statements about the government not having the authority to enforce The First Table: “Winthrop’s April 12, 1631 journal entry shows that Williams was already expressing his classic view of separation of church and state within nine weeks of his arrival in Massachusetts.”<sup>45</sup>

This controversial stance on The First Table was not an objection that came from being a Separatists however, as they too thought that it was the place of the church to

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<sup>44</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 206.

<sup>45</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 23.

enforce all of the commandments. This was a conviction that was uniquely Williams'. It is possible that this stance derived from Coke's example of protecting individuals' rights from the High Commission. It may have also derived from the views expressed by the first English Baptists twenty years prior: "They had worshipped secretly near Williams's home—and many had been sent to Newgate prison, a few hundred yards away from his home."<sup>46</sup> Williams grew up in their proximity and was known to later quote some of their writings. The English Baptists championed this position to protect themselves from persecution.

Whatever the source of his influence may have been, the public expression of this view would stir controversy and draw negative attention from the most powerful people in the colony. Immediately following his rejection of the Boston church, he made the twenty mile journey to Salem. There he was warmly embraced. Salem was one of the poorest communities in Massachusetts and was largely seen as a backwoods area (even by modest American standards). As one of the oldest communities, it was once a more respected and thriving area, but after Winthrop became Governor the focus shifted dramatically towards economically and socially advancing the Boston area: "Not surprisingly then, Salem nursed a lingering resentment toward and desire for independence from Boston."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 210.

<sup>47</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 212.

This made it a good fit for Williams, who too sought to distance himself from the Boston church. The leaders of the Salem church offered Williams the position of teacher at their church not long after his arrival. He readily accepted, which gave Williams a job and gave the Salem church something to boast over the Boston church. Less than two weeks after his acceptance, magistrates met in Boston to discuss what they should do about Williams' recent employment with the Salem church.

John Endicott, who was the magistrate from Salem, received word that those in Boston "marveled" that the Salem church "would chuse [Williams], without advising with" them first. They strongly urged Endicott to instruct the Salem church to "forbeare to proceede until they had conferred about it."<sup>48</sup> While the Boston church was not demanding that Endicott and the Salem church not move forward with Williams, they were *strongly* advising against it. During this time, Endicott himself was also working through a court settlement in which these same people would decide his sentence, which intensified the pressure of the situation. In the end, Endicott paid a small fine for his infraction and the Salem church withdrew their offer to Williams.

With it being made clear that the Boston church would work to inhibit Williams from working within any of the churches in the Bay Colony, he and his wife journeyed outside of the Bay to the neighboring colony of Plymouth. Being outside of the jurisdiction of the Bay Colony and within a community that was on premise more willing to separate from the Church of England made the move a fairly simple choice. Not long after arriving, Mary gave birth to their first child, a daughter. It was time that he settled in

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<sup>48</sup> John Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, eds. Richard Dunn, James Savage, and Laetitia Yeandle (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 50.

and made a home in America. Instead of attempting to make a living as a minister or teacher, he decided to partake in the industries of Plymouth; he farmed squash and corn and raised cattle.<sup>49</sup>

He worked to weave himself into the fabric of Plymouth and was generally well received. He befriended prominent people like Governor William Bradford and Assistant Governor Edward Winslow. Bradford later lamented in his journal that Williams was “a man godly and zealous, having many precious parts.”<sup>50</sup> Williams became an active participant in the Plymouth church. He faithfully attended every service and even engaged in some light teaching duties. He was never paid for his work in the church or offered a formal position. This was perhaps due to the Plymouth leaders having knowledge of his falling out with the Boston church and them not wanting to become involved.

Bradford would later write about Williams’ time in the Plymouth church and how much he appreciated him: “His teaching was well approoved, for the benefite of which I still blese God, and am thankfull to him, even for his sharpest admonitions and reproofs, so farr as they agreed with truth.”<sup>51</sup> Despite his falling out with the Boston church and the magistrates of Massachusetts, Williams was seemingly able to recover his reputation and good favor with the local Puritan communities. Even though he had expounded some repudiated ideas, he was still generally accepted and thought well of. He was even able to

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<sup>49</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 215.

<sup>50</sup> William Bradford, *Of Plimoth Plantation* (Boston: Wright & Potter printing co, 1901), 369.

<sup>51</sup> Bradford, *Of Plimoth Plantation*, 370.

continue a working relationship with Winthrop, whom he would represent in business dealing in the Bay and Plymouth colonies.

This sense of harmony and acceptance that he found in Plymouth did not last long however. Bradford expressed his concern over Williams in his journal; stating that he began: “fall[ing] into some strang opinions, and from opinion to practise; which caused some controversie betweene the church and him, and in the end some discontente on his parte.”<sup>52</sup> It was two years into his stay in Plymouth when Williams requested to be dismissed from the Plymouth church. He would return to Salem in 1633, where he hoped to attempt to settle in again.

These strange opinions and practices that Bradford accused Williams of undertaking were not plainly expressed in his journal. It is highly likely though that Williams’ primary issue with the Plymouth church circled back to his passionate Separatists ways. For even the self-described Separatists of Plymouth were not as severed from the old Anglican church as Williams would prefer. In a letter written later in his life Williams described the Plymouth church as: “Professing to be a separated people in [New England] and yet communicating with the parishes in Old [England], by their members repairing on frequent occasions thether.”<sup>53</sup>

Williams believed that any communication or contact with the Church of England would serve as a link to the old and perverted church, which would only undermine the separation that the Plymouth church was trying to achieve. He was frustrated that

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<sup>52</sup> Bradford, *Of Plimoth Plantation*, 370.

<sup>53</sup> Roger Williams, *The Correspondence of John Cotton Junior*, (Boston: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 2009) 77.



members of the community still sought ties to the English parish. Not even the separation of thousands of miles and a vast ocean could completely stop the Church of England's influence from penetrating parishes. For Williams, it must have been disheartening and exasperating for him to realize that even the supposed likeminded Puritan Separatists of America still sought some relational, albeit casual, ties to the corrupted English church that he wanted to leave behind.

Though he still had some supporters within the community, the Plymouth church accepted his request for dismissal. Plymouth leaders sent "some caution to [Massachusetts magistrates] concerning him, and what care they ought to have of him."<sup>54</sup> Though he was likeable and came with an impressive resume, he seemed to stir up apprehension and concern wherever he went. He would carry this quality, which disturbed the stability of Puritan life, with him into Salem as well.

Similar to his time in Plymouth, Williams supported himself and his family through farming and trading with local natives. He also assisted the Salem church pastor, Samuel Skelton, in an unofficial capacity. Despite the uncertainty he encountered from both the Boston and Plymouth churches, he was generally accepted and welcomed back into the community. As the Bay Colony slowly advanced past its primitive beginning, Williams was able to build a relatively comfortable life for himself and his growing family in Salem.

However, his simple and comfortable life would soon become troubled. In 1633, two prominent Puritan pastors from England arrived, John Cotton and Thomas Hooker.

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<sup>54</sup> Bradford, *Of Plimoth Plantation*, 370.

These men were highly revered and immediately placed in positions of high esteem in Massachusetts. Cotton would be placed in the Boston church as its new teacher and Hooker soon after became the pastor of the Newton church. The two men brought with them a new energy and religious zeal. In response to this renewed enthusiasm, the ministers from the various Bay Colony parishes began meeting every two weeks to discuss various religious topics and distresses.<sup>55</sup>

Williams and Skelton both objected to these meetings occurring. They both feared that these meetings would lead to a forced uniformity amongst the churches that was not supposed to occur. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, and the Presbyterian Church, where the respective heads of the religious institutions would have a hand in controlling each successive parish body, the Puritan model was intentionally designed to foster independent churches that did not follow any stringent hierarchy.

Williams feared that the arrival of these new pastors, coupled with the Boston church's already questionable history of abiding by this design, would cause individual church liberty to be disregarded altogether. It had only been three years since the Boston church originally overstepped their bounds by intervening in the Salem church's plan to hire Williams. Given this, it was to Williams a justified concern that these meetings could easily morph into a structural takeover of all Massachusetts Bay parishes.

His disagreements with the Bay Colony did not stop there, however. Winthrop received word, shortly after Williams moved back to Salem, that he had authored a controversial treatise during his time in Plymouth. Winthrop asked Williams to share the

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<sup>55</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 31.

document with him and he did. What was written in it was found to be so insulting and blasphemous that Winthrop immediately called a meeting with the leaders of the colony. The meeting resulted in mutual outrage that ended in the decision to call Williams into court to formally censure and punish him.<sup>56</sup>

What Williams wrote in the treatise was his overt opinion on how the English government, specifically the king, had mistreated the native population of America. Williams argued that the colonists did not have any explicit claim or legitimate right to take possession of American land on the king's word alone. He stated that the king told "a solemne public lye" to the colonists by claiming that the English had any inherent authority to claim Native land. He felt that the land rightfully belonged to the Native Americans and that it should be gifted or purchased, not just taken. He explained that the Natives did sell or trade their land when they were of the mind to do so, which means that the English could and *should* barter with them for land: "The Natives are very exact and punctuall in the bounds of their Lands, belonging to this or that Prince or People.... And I have knowne them to make bargaine and sale amongst themselves for a small piece or quantity of Ground."<sup>57</sup>

He also vehemently objected to King James' claim that he was the first Christian king to discover the Americas, as well at the assertion by both King James and King Charles that Europe was a Christendom. The Puritans regarded much of Catholic and Protestant Europe as being out of the scope of Christ's true church, which would

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<sup>56</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 223.

<sup>57</sup> Roger Williams, *A Key Into the Language of America* (London: Gregory Dexter, 1643), 95.

disqualify Europe from being a Christian kingdom to Williams. He also likened King Charles to passages from Revelations about kings being linked to the devil.<sup>58</sup>

Winthrop explained in his journal the three aspects of this exposition that offended himself and the magistrates: “1. For that he chargeth King James to have told a solemn public lie.... 2. For that he chargeth him and others with blasphemy for calling Europe Christendom or the Christian world; 3. For that he did personally apply to our present King Charles these three places in the revelation.”<sup>59</sup> The statements made by Williams were bold and troubling to all who read them. To speak so badly of the king, questioning the legitimacy of his royal charters, accusing him of lying, and likening him to unflattering biblical passages was just too seditious to casually disregard.

Winthrop felt strongly that Williams’ treatise was too provocative, and that he must be confronted about its contents. He demanded that Williams retract his unfounded opinions. Winthrop describes Williams’ contrite response in his journal: “returned a verye modest & discreat answeare...[to] the Councell, verye submissively: professinge his intent to have onely to have written for the private satisfaction of the Governor &c. of Plymouth: without any purpose to have stirred any further in it, if the Governor heere had not required a Copeye of him.”<sup>60</sup> Williams even offered to burn the pages that he had written. Winthrop and the Bay magistrates were satisfied with the sincerity of his apology and moved on from it.

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<sup>58</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 33.

<sup>59</sup> Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 62.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid

Despite the hopes of Winthrop and the Bay Colony magistrates, this would not be the last time that these issues would be brought to light. The disagreements between them were far from settled, and would in fact expand and intensify over the coming months. Williams would not be able to quietly conform and temper his strongly held opinions for long, and the Bay authorities would not be able to contain his defiance for long. Co-existing would not be a viable long term option; a final rupture in their precariously patched relationship was imminent.

Following the passing of Salem's minister, Samuel Skeleton, Williams stepped in as the unofficial pastor of the Salem church. After taking on the larger and more prominent responsibility of leading the congregation, Williams felt that he could no longer remain quiet on issues that had long bothered him. For Williams it was not just an inconvenience to comply with what the Bay Colony expected of him, but rather a true burden on his conscience. He would later write that the "thoughts so deeply afflicted [my] Soule and conscience."<sup>61</sup> Williams fundamentally disagreed with how the Bay Colony was religiously and societally operated and was finally bolstered enough to stand his ground on the matter.

He began to publicly come out against some of the Bay Colony's policies and procedures, repeating many of the sentiments that had put him in precarious positions in the past. He commented on his long time objection of magistrates enforcing the first four commandments, as well as a new objection to government-compelled church attendance and the forced oath of loyalty that were being freshly implemented. Finally, he again

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<sup>61</sup> Henry Dexter, *As to Roger Williams and His Banishment from the Massachusetts Plantation* (Boston: Congressional Publishing Society, 1876), 66.

brought up his belief that their royal charter was insufficient and that they needed to properly acquire their land.<sup>62</sup>

Winthrop and the magistrates of the colony were perturbed that Williams would dare return to the same topics that they had not long ago instructed him to move away from. Winthrop wrote that Williams “had broken his promise to us, in teaching publickly against the kings patent, and our great sin in claiming right thereby to this countrie, &c.”<sup>63</sup> They felt that Williams was directly challenging their authority and rebelling against their directives, which he was. The contempt for authority that Williams exemplified and the willingness to bolster contrary opinions could not be tolerated, especially not in a society that was predicated on conformity like the Bay Colony was.

On account of his newly elevated position in the Salem church and the public spouting of his divisive opinions, Williams was summoned to court on July 8<sup>th</sup>, 1635. Williams by this time had paired some of his objections and talking points down. He had set aside some of his long held objections, namely the unethical nature of taking American land from natives and his aversion to King Charles, in order to focus on the loyalty oath and the legal enforcement of the First Table. While his opinions had not changed on the latter, he was fixated in on the issues that immediately affected his church in Salem.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 264.

<sup>63</sup> Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 76.

<sup>64</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *Roger Williams: the Church and the State* (London: W. W, 2007), 36.

Williams was not against oaths taking place within religious ceremony, but swearing an oath in a spiritual context was a deeply impactful, personal, and serious act to him. He relented that “an oath was part of God’s worship,” and that “Christ’s prerogative [was] to have his office established by oath.”<sup>65</sup> He felt that to compel people to swear an oath of religious allegiance was to trivialize the significance of its nature and warp it into an earthly possession of the state, instead of an intimate spiritual link between God and the swearer. This was shameful and sinful in Williams’ worldview.

Williams defended his sentiments on the First Table by stating that magistrates were “properly and adequately fitted by God to preserve the Civil state in civil peace and order, as he hath also appointed a spiritual government and governors in matters pertaining to his worship and the consciences of men.”<sup>66</sup> He felt that the magistrates and the spiritual leaders of the Bay Colony had been ordained by God to fulfill different purposes, and that having magistrates enforce spiritual guidelines was a gross overstep by the government. Faith and religious matters needed to be left with the church and matters of civil authority needed to be left with the government.

The problem was that his interpretation of a civil state was different than the leaders of the Bay Colony. To them, the civility of the community was profoundly linked to and determined by the confines of religion. It was through their communal faith as Puritans that they understood the world, what was right and wrong, and what was

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<sup>65</sup> John Cotton, “A Reply to Mr. Williams His Examination,” reprinted in Theodore P. Greene, *Roger Williams and the Massachusetts Magistrates* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1964).

<sup>66</sup> Roger Williams, *BLOODY TENENT OF PERSECUTION FOR CAUSE OF CONSCIENCE DISCUSSED: and Mr. Cotton's Letter ... Examined and Answered* (London: The Hanserd Knollys Society, 1848), 384.

expected of them in order to fulfill God's purpose for their society. It was the responsibility of the state to infuse society with Godly edicts and guidance. The two could not possibly be separated as Williams suggested.<sup>67</sup>

The magistrates consulted the local ministers and were given the advice that they should tell Salem that they needed to *remove* Williams from his position in the church due to his threatening opinions: "professedly declared...that he who should obstinately maintaine suche opinions...were to be removed, & that the other Churches ought to request the magistrate so to doe."<sup>68</sup> The court chose to delay its choice on how best to punish Williams, giving him some time to correct his views. In the meantime, they withheld a land grant request from the Salem church in order to send a clear message to them. Their defiance in employing Williams against their consent was taken as a great offense.<sup>69</sup>

In October, a final court hearing occurred. Williams had done nothing to illustrate a change of heart during these few months. In fact, he had dug his heels in even more by attempting to send letters to other parishes to rally support against the Bay government's abuse of power and their assault on the liberties of the Salem church. The minutes of the hearing reveal his final sentence: "It is therefore ordered that the said Mr. Roger Williams shall depart out of this jurisdiction within sixe weekes nowe next ensueing, which if hee

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<sup>67</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 6.

<sup>68</sup> Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 150.

<sup>69</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 53.



neglect to perform it shalbe lawful for the Governor & two of the magistrates to send him to some place out of this jurisdiction, not to return any more.”<sup>70</sup>

Winthrop, having been in attendance, stated in his journal that Williams “justified both these letters, & maintained all of his opinions.”<sup>71</sup> After his sentence came down, his church in Salem wrote an apologetic letter to the Bay magistrates in which they rebuked his sentiments and admitted to their lapse in judgement for supporting Williams. A few months later, in recognition of the Salem church finally bending to the theocracy and utter authority of the Bay Colony, the disputed land request was awarded to Salem.

This must have been an appalling and shocking sentence to Williams. To be banished from a civil society for doing nothing more than speaking your personal views railed against everything Williams had been taught by Coke. The freedom to openly express your opinions was a cornerstone of individual liberty and a right afforded to all free Englishmen, even those in America (thanks to Coke extending English protections to American colonies in 1608). Yet, Williams was being excised from the colony for it. The injustice of the situation was deeply felt, but he nevertheless accepted the terms of his punishment.<sup>72</sup>

He was not allowed to attend the Salem church during his remaining time in the colony. However, a group of his faithful followers would come to his home to visit with him for the purpose of hearing him lecture or preach. When the magistrates in Boston

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<sup>70</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 56.

<sup>71</sup> Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 158.

<sup>72</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 284.

caught wind of this they were infuriated. According to Winthrop the real source of their concern was that Williams “had drawn above twenty persons to his opinion, and they were intended to erect a plantation about the Narragansett Bay, from whence the infection would easily spread unto these churches, the people being, many of them, much taken with the apprehension of his godlines.”<sup>73</sup>

The magistrates could not contend with the idea of a refuge being established beyond their control. They did not want people to take up with him and his repulsive notions, especially not close to their borders. To counter this from happening, some magistrates suggested executing Williams. However, most thought this to be too extreme, so instead it was decided that they would send him back to England and simply leave him to his fate there. They all understood the grave dangers of being a Puritan in England, but it was becoming achingly clear that they needed him either dead or much further away if they were to truly rid themselves of him.

Williams at this time was very ill. Winthrop describes Williams’ reply to the warrant being issued for him to arrive in Boston port to be extradited back to England: “He returned answer that he could not come without hazard of his life.”<sup>74</sup> Governor John Hayes did not waver however, he ordered Captain Underhill to apprehend Williams and force him onto the next ship bound for England. A snowstorm delayed Underhill’s mission in Salem however, forcing him to wait it out for four long days.

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<sup>73</sup> Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 164.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

By the time Underhill and his small campaign of men arrived at Williams' home it was too late. Williams had been warned by Winthrop that officials were coming to arrest him and escaped into the deep wilderness three days prior. Ill and completely alone, Williams trekked through the dark woods of winter in search of what he could not find in either England or Massachusetts Bay, freedom.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 290.

## CHAPTER III

### The Wilderness

Roger Williams' compelled abandonment of his Salem home was certainly a low point in his life. As he made his way deeper into the bleak and torrid American wilderness, an overwhelming sense of sorrow and disappointment must have accompanied him. He journeyed to America in search of a community in which he could belong. A place where he could freely express his religious views and bring honor to God in the company of likeminded people. What he found instead was a stringent group of tyrannical Puritans who coerced citizens into religious and social conformity, and who were brazenly intolerant of any diversity.

He would later recount the utter betrayal and cruelty he felt in being banished from the Bay Colony, especially during a harsh winter. He could never fathom how he could "be denyed the common aire to breath in, and a civill cohabitation upon the same common earth and also without mercy and humane compassion be exposed to winter miseries in a howling Wildernes?"<sup>76</sup> Those who he considered his friends and colleagues, ultimately cast him out. The life that he wanted would not be realized amongst them.

That long and lonely winter was full of torment, as he lacked any comforts of home, was far removed from his family, and was at the mercy of Wampanoags, who were willing to give him shelter. He later recounted that for fourteen weeks he did "not know what Bread or Bed did meane" and that he endured "distressed wandrings amongst the

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<sup>76</sup> Williams, *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, 314.

Barbarians,” and was fully “destitute of food, of clothes.” In the lowest moments he relented that “I may say as Jacob, Peniel, that is, I have seen the face of God.”<sup>77</sup>

Though he was devastated by the turn of events and forced to struggle through the brutal winter months, he had not given up on his original intention in coming to America. If anything, his negative experiences with the Bay Colony likely intensified his resolve to find or even *create* the community he pictured. To accomplish this lofty goal, he would need a lot of help though. He certainly was not going to get any kind of assistance from his fellow Englishmen, so instead he turned to his friends and acquaintances within the native community.

Prior to his banishment, Williams was known to venture outside of the colony to observe, trade, and cultivate friendships with affable members of the Wampanoag and Narragansett tribes. As Williams hailed from England, he had never seen native tribes before. He was drawn in by their culture, spirituality, and way of life. Wanting to learn and understand more about them, he would go deep into Narragansett country and stay for extended visits. He would later relent that he felt “a constant, zealous desire to dive into the Natives’ language” and that “God was pleased to give me a painful, patient spirit to lodge with them in their filthy smoky holes, even while I lived at Plymouth and Salem, to gain their tongue.”<sup>78</sup>

Williams was also compelled to build a rapport with the natives so that he could cultivate a healthy trading relationship with them. He would exchange axes, kettles,

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<sup>77</sup> Williams, *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, 315.

<sup>78</sup> Williams, *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, 18.

knives, cloth, and other English minted objects for furs, wampum, and cornmeal, which were all coveted items in the Bay Colony. It was physically demanding and potentially dangerous to trek deep into native lands, but Williams reaped the commercial benefits of his efforts. He would also come to reap the benefits of befriending the natives and accruing useful knowledge surrounding their culture and the local geography. Given some time and he mastered the coastline, coming to know the locations of many rivers, ponds, swamps, as well as the location of numerous tribes that dwelled near the Bay.<sup>79</sup>

Williams' involvement with the natives went far beyond the typical interactions that most Puritans would seek. While many colonists would trade with the natives, Williams went further than that. He wanted to immerse himself in their culture and really understand their way of life. Despite his willingness to comprehend and learn from the natives, he still shared in many of the Puritan attitudes and reservations when it came to their culture and way of life. He openly condemned their "filthy smoak holes," and would on occasion refer to them as "wolves with men's minds."<sup>80</sup> When it came to their spirituality, Williams was especially appalled. He openly argued that the natives were spiritually lost people who had barbaric rituals and practices. He would express fear that their religious acts would conjure up the devil, which made him extra wary and vigilant to never participate in any of their ceremonies.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> James A. Warren, *GOD, WAR, AND PROVIDENCE: The Epic Struggle of Roger Williams and the Narragansett Indians ... against the Puritans of New England* (New York: SCRIBNER, 2018), 59.

<sup>80</sup> Williams, *Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, 267.

<sup>81</sup> Warren, *GOD, WAR, AND PROVIDENCE*, 60.

Their stark religious differences did not deter Williams (like it did many), but instead drew him in closer. He was not afraid of their way of life and did not feel that being in their proximity chafed against his own private faith. He felt that he could accomplish two tasks at once: He could observe their piety and learn as much as possible, while also evangelizing and educating them on his own Christian beliefs when appropriate. He never denied or overlooked his Christian obligation to evangelize to the natives and renounce their spiritual rituals.

The Puritans of the Bay were chauvinistic and felt spiritually superior to other religions. They generally held a lot of contempt towards the native population, especially when it came to their spiritual practices. However, Williams' outlook and approach were different. He did not seek to pressure or compel conversion or cast continual malice their way. He instead wanted to illustrate the light of God and show them the truth that surrounded his own personal faith, leaving it up to the natives to decide whether to pursue the tenants of Christianity or not.

Indeed, in time Williams came to see the whole practice of forced conversion to be an unchristian act. Much like his opinions surrounding required oaths of allegiance, he felt that obliging people to convert religions would only lead to individuals joining the church to please others and not to pursue God. These false conversions would only serve to undermine the integrity of the church. He believed that it was far better "to let God open up the Indians' souls to His message in His own time than to have it shoved down their throats by missionaries, even well-intentioned."<sup>82</sup> In essence, he only wanted

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid

people to convert to Christianity who made the choice by their own volition and who seriously wanted to follow the faith.

In making the conscious choice to not vigorously convert and culture the natives, he was able to focus in on their own natural culture and religion. He made notes of his observations, keenly studying their language and way of life. This would serve to benefit not only him, but also generations of people when he would, in 1643, publish his findings in a book titled *A Key into the Language of America*. In seeking to better understand the natives, he came to respect and even admire them in a way that other Englishmen could not comprehend and certainly did not appreciate.

In studying the natives so closely, he inevitably compared the English culture that he was familiar with to all that he witnessed and absorbed from native societies. What he found was that there was a lot to praise and that they had virtues and strengths that the English lacked. In *A Key* he stated: "I could never discern that excess of scandalous sins amongst them, which Europe aboundeth with. Drunkenness and gluttony, generally they know not what sins they be; and although they have not so much to restrain them as the English murders, adulteries, etc. as amongst the English."<sup>83</sup> Though natives were perceived to be barbarous and uncivil, Williams was deeply surprised to find that they appeared less prone to sinful nature than the civil and Christian English.

He also came to find that the natives were genuinely more receptive to strangers and more hospitable than the English. They were rich in the spirit of generosity, always willing to offer food and shelter to those in need. Williams openly criticized the English

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<sup>83</sup> Williams, *A Key Into the Language of America*, 143.



on this point, accusing them of possessing less of the true temperament and spirit of Christ than the heathens he was among: “It is a strange truth that a man shall generally find more free entertainment and refreshing among these barbarians than among thousands who call themselves Christians.”<sup>84</sup> Williams witnessed and partook in their warmth and kindness firsthand. He saw how even those who were spiritually lost to God were capable of expressing many of the civil virtues and merits of faith, at times even better than those rooted in Christianity.

Williams also came to respect the Narragansett’s attitude towards wealth and material possessions. In their villages there was no great hierarchy of prosperity. No one suffered in poverty and no one hailed from overabundance either. He states: “There were no beggars amongst them, no fatherless children unprovided for.”<sup>85</sup> This was likely a stark contrast to the London city that he grew up in and even the English colonies he was presently part of. Personal wealth and status were of immense importance to the English, and there was quite a bit of economic stratification.

Their understanding and view of material possessions also transferred over to how they regarded their land. Williams stated that he had “known them to make bargains or sale amongst themselves for a small piece or quantity of ground: notwithstanding a sinful opinion amongst many [white people] that Christians have the right to heathens’ land.”<sup>86</sup> While they would openly release land between themselves for very little, they would be hesitant to release it to the colonists. Culturally, the English and the natives saw land

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<sup>84</sup> Williams, *A Key Into the Language of America*, 16.

<sup>85</sup> Williams, *A Key Into the Language of America*, 29.

<sup>86</sup> Williams, *A Key Into the Language of America*, 95.

transactions very differently. While natives would negotiate short term deals (more like leases), Englishmen sought to make permanent purchases of land in order to cultivate private property.

The cultural differences in how land was viewed, along with the entitled nature of the colonists, made natives very uneasy. They saw how the colonists greedily and liberally viewed their land and were therefore very cautious when dealing with them. Williams was a very vocal advocate that the natives were entitled to their land and that they needed to be fairly compensated for it, but not many other colonists shared his controversial view.

The Narragansett's governmental structure was surprising to Williams, who likely did not expect much sophistication or complexity. Their government was monarchical in form, but democratic in operation.<sup>87</sup> He noted: "The sachems, although they have an absolute monarchy over the people; yet they will not conclude or aught that concerns all, either laws or subsidies, or war unto which the people are adverse."<sup>88</sup> Despite any claims to the contrary, Williams saw that the natives functioned in a more democratic and liberal manner than did the Bay Colony.

Williams curiously appreciated how the natives took the aspects of different government structures to create an arrangement that catered to their needs. The one aspect of Narragansett culture that captivated Williams the most however, was their religion. Though Williams (being a devout Puritan) could not embrace the tenants of their

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<sup>87</sup> Warren, *GOD, WAR, AND PROVIDENCE*, 147.

<sup>88</sup> Williams, *A Key Into the Language of America*, 224.

spirituality, he did come to respect it. Even going as far to find similarities between his own religious beliefs and theirs. He stated how the natives believed fervently that there was a God that created their souls and the world in which they lived. They further believed, alongside the Puritans, that God maintained an active presence in their lives and had authority over the events that transpired around them.<sup>89</sup>

Williams was also taken with the religious tolerance that he encountered amongst the natives. Hailing from England then the Bay Colony, he was not accustomed to such a high level of acceptance towards spiritual diversity. It was a surprising model, but one that he appreciated: "They have a modest religious persuasion not to disturb any man, either themselves, English, Dutch or any in their conscience, and worship, and therefore say: peace, hold your peace."<sup>90</sup> The religious flexibility that he found severely lacking in the Bay Colony was present amongst the natives and did not cause the copious unrest that most Puritans dreaded.

Though he was mostly positive and offered plenty of praise in *A Key*, there were some aspects of the Narragansett tribe that Williams acknowledged as uncivil and repulsive. He held disdain for the *witchcraft* baked into their spiritual practices, as well as the ways in which they worshipped. The belief that the natives used witchcraft and other sinful means to express their spirituality was a deeply held Puritan viewpoint that Williams seemed to gleam onto. The Puritans "believed that the Indian inhabitants worshiped devils, that Indian religious practitioners were witches, and that the Indians

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<sup>89</sup> Davis, Jack L. "Roger Williams among the Narragansett Indians." *The New England Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (1970): 593-604. 600.

<sup>90</sup> Williams, *A Key Into the Language of America*, 129.

themselves were bewitched... Unlike Indian beliefs about the supernatural qualities of Englishmen, which seemed to have been temporary and situational, Puritan commitment to the devil-and-witchcraft theory of Indian culture intensified rather than diminished with experience.”<sup>91</sup>

He also hated their overly elaborate sports and games, and the horrific trophies that came out of these games and out of war. It was not uncommon for native tribes to decapitate their enemies’ heads and proudly showcase them as trophies in their camps. The permissive way in which they raised their children also confounded him. <sup>92</sup>He noted how they provided great affection for their young, but lacked much of any discipline, which made the young “saucy, bold, and undutiful.” <sup>93</sup>

Despite their differences and faults however, Williams came to hold a different view of the natives than most colonists. He did not look at them and see simple, barbaric beings who needed to be civilized and evangelized. He instead saw good people who, while not living in the light of God, were still decent humans who practiced many of the Christian virtues and principles that the English failed to carry out. The English were not inherently better than the natives by his judgment. He would state this to his fellow countrymen: “Boast not proud English of thy birth and blood, thy brother Indian is by

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<sup>91</sup> William S. Simmons, “Cultural Bias in the New England Puritans’ Perception of Indians,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (January 1981): 56.

<sup>92</sup> Jackm, “Roger Williams among the Narragansett Indians,” 601.

<sup>93</sup> Williams, *A Key Into the Language of America*, 29.

birth as good. Of one blood God made him, and thee, and all, as wise as fair, as personal.”<sup>94</sup>

Aside from the knowledge and understanding he was able to cultivate, his choice to distance himself from the usual Puritan attitudes regarding natives also allowed him to foster meaningful bonds with them. As he did not ascribe to the standard Puritan treatments, they came to see him as a different kind of man. A man who treated them respectfully, who never tried to forcefully modify them, who publicly advocated for their fair treatment, and who understood that their way of life was just as sacred to them as the English way of life was to him. Over time, through consistent words and actions, Williams came to earn their trust and friendship.

When Williams was banished from Salem, he relied heavily on his native contacts and friendships for survival. It was brutal winter, one that would have killed him had he not been offered help from the natives. He decided to make his way to Narragansett country. That it where he had spent the most time and where he knew he could find his closest allies, Massasoit (who was the Pokanoket chief) and Canonibus (who lead the Narragansett tribe). It was a treacherous and long fourteen-week journey, but he endured it. Williams was welcomed by his friends when he finally arrived.<sup>95</sup>

Through Wampanoag messengers, Williams communicated with a dozen or so individuals who were faithful followers of his in Boston and Salem that winter. In late March 1636, approximately a half dozen of these followers and their families arrived in

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<sup>94</sup> Williams, *A Key Into the Language of America*, 53.

<sup>95</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 61.

Narragansett country. They made the journey to Williams in order to begin constructing the settlement that had been tentatively discussed while they were all residents in the Bay Colony. This was likely at one point nothing more than a pipe dream, but given the current political climate of the Bay and circumstances that Williams found himself in, it was now slowly morphing into a reality. They began building what was a crude camp at the outer reaches of the Plymouth Colony, on the eastern shore of the Seekronk River.<sup>96</sup>

This arrangement did not last long however, as Governor Edward Winslow of Plymouth quickly informed Williams that his encampment was set on Plymouth territory. Winslow suggested that Williams move across the Seekronk River, where he would be out of their jurisdiction. Williams turned to Narragansett leaders, Canonicus and Miantonomi, to negotiate the acquisition of the tract of land across from their current location. After confirming clear boundaries, Canonicus and Miantonomi agreed to allow Williams to settle there.<sup>97</sup> Williams would later explain how he acquired the land not through money, but through his friendships and by the grace of God: “I was the procurer of the purchase, not by monies nor payment, the natives being so shy and jealous, that monies could not do it ; but by that language, acquaintance, and favour with the natives and other advantages which it pleased God to give me.”<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Warren, *GOD, WAR, AND PROVIDENCE*, 74.

<sup>97</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 298.

<sup>98</sup> “Confirmation Deed of Roger Williams,” *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England*. 1. Vol. 1. 1636-1663. (Providence, RI: CRAWFORD GREENE AND BROTHER, STATE PRINTERS, 1856), 23.

Leaders and residents of Massachusetts were no happier with the news of Williams establishing a settlement on the other side of the river than they were with him being on the bank. Massasoit, while a friend of Williams personally, objected to Williams settling in a location that continued to anger those in Massachusetts. His concerns likely spurred from pressure from leaders in Massachusetts, who had previously promised to support his tribe. He worried that his connection to Williams would bring him out of Massachusetts' good favor, putting his tribe in a line of wrath. Massasoit began to indicate (perhaps as a way to recuse himself from the situation) that the land was technically a false war gain. He stated that they had not fairly vanquished their enemies for the land, but instead won it through the plague killing his opponents. If they no longer claimed the land then it was technically in Wampanoag territory, which placed it still in Plymouth jurisdiction.<sup>99</sup>

By this time Edward Winslow had been replaced as governor of Plymouth by William Bradford. With all the controversy attached to his land, Williams likely felt doubtful about the security of his settlement. He worried that Plymouth would uproot him again. Bradford had grown fond of Williams while he was in Plymouth however, and felt a great deal of sympathy for his current situation. He stated that Williams had already suffered the "losse of a Harvest that yeare...[and was] ...as good as banished from Plymmouth, as from the Massachu." Bradford swore that he would not antagonize him. He pledged that even if "after due Examinacion it should be found true what the

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<sup>99</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 298.

Barbarian said,” still Williams “should not be molested and tost up and downe againe while they had Breath in their Bodies.”<sup>100</sup>

The land that he was granted would be the starting point of what would become the Rhode Island Colony, and it would be named Providence, which was of course chosen very purposefully by Williams. He would later explain why he selected this name: “[H]aving made covenant of peaceable neighborhood with the sachems and natives round about us, and having, in a sense of Gods merciful providence unto me in my distress, called the place PROVIDENCE, I desired it might be for a shelter for persons distressed for conscience.”<sup>101</sup>

Williams was now free to construct the community that he could not find anywhere in Europe or America. A community where people, like him, were free to pursue their faith in whatever manner their conscious dictated. He envisioned a true safe-haven from religious persecution, unlike any that had ever been attempted before.

For this society to succeed, Williams would have to venture into uncharted territory. There was no model for the exact society he intended to create and much to hinder his success. He was up for the daunting task, however. Taking the sum of everything he had learned and experienced, he would pour it all into the creation of Rhode Island. He would take the boldness, political agility, and belief in separation of powers from Coke; The ability to fundamentally question what is known and established from Bacon; The horrendous feeling of being harassed and banished for personal

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<sup>100</sup> Williams, *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*, 611.

<sup>101</sup> Williams, *The Complete Writing of Roger Williams*. 347.



convictions from the Bay Colony; And the understanding that benevolence and civility were not exclusively tied to the Christian faith from the natives.

## CHAPTER IV

### The Establishment of Rhode Island

The area of land in which Williams would construct his colony consisted of the greater Narragansett Bay area and Aquidneck Island, which was a sizeable island in the middle of the bay. The topography and natural features were comparable to the Bay Colony, though Rhode Island contained clusters of rolling hills that the Bay did not. It also featured a powerful stream system, plenty of wooded areas, and quick access to the bay for transportation and trading purposes. It was overall a very nice piece of land to build on. Its many positive attributes challenged Williams and his early cohort to see the possibilities and envision a bright future for the settlement.<sup>102</sup>

This bright future would not be easily attained, however. Williams quickly found himself confronted with the reality of erecting Providence with no governmental organization, no religious structure, no economic plan, no strategy as to how his novel *safe haven* would function, and on land that had absolutely no legal standing with the English government. There were far more problems than there were solutions, and few places to turn to for help. One source however, that Williams did reach out to in the early period of the colony was John Winthrop.

Williams saw Winthrop as a mentor and respected that he was someone who had accomplished a similar feat. He valued his insight and sought his guidance as to how to approach the monumental task that lay before him in Providence. In his letter, Williams wrote how “the frequent experience of your loving ear, ready and open towards me...

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<sup>102</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 302.

embolden me to request a word of private advice.”<sup>103</sup> Williams went on to explain how Providence had been functioning up to that point. He stated that the current residents had been governing themselves informally, with the heads of each family meeting every two weeks to discuss “our common peace, watch, and planting; and mutuall consent hath finished all matters with speede and peace.”<sup>104</sup>

This casual system had worked fine up to a point, but he explained how matters were growing increasingly complicated with the growth of the colony. Men, who were unattached to any families, arrived wanting to participate in the government and have a vote in matters. Though Williams was the sole owner of the land, which by all English and colonial precedent gave him complete political control of the region, he was not interested in governing in a dictatorial fashion. Instead he explained to Winthrop that he intended to “freely subject my selfe to Common Consent.”<sup>105</sup>

Along with the update and request for advice, Williams also sent Winthrop a draft of the civil compact that he was authoring for the colony. It boldly stipulated that Providence would offer liberty of conscience to all residents. He wanted all residents to have the liberty to pursue God in the way that their conscience dictated. In a commitment to establish no religious favor or preference in the civil document, his draft very purposefully remained religiously opaque. It did not put forth a promise to erect a Godly

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<sup>103</sup> Roger Williams, *Letters of Roger Williams. 1632-1682*, (Providence: The Narragansett Club, 1874), 4.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

utopia or lay claim to God's grace on the endeavor. It did not even request God's blessing moving forward.<sup>106</sup>

The only mention of God was to suggest that Williams had been "cast by the providence of the God of Heaven, remote from others of our Countrymen amongst the Barbarous in this towne of New Providence."<sup>107</sup> Winthrop's reply did not survive. Whatever the advice may have been though, the civil compact remained almost the same. One of the only changes was that God was completely taken out of the document, which was likely not a suggestion of Winthrop's, who was firmly established in his view that God and government should be closely intertwined. For Williams to voluntarily omit any mention of God from the legal document that would essentially launch his colony was an unprecedented and bold statement. The scores of similar founding documents, whether it be English, French, or Spanish, all clearly spoke of God's purpose and favor for their ventures. This intentional exclusion illustrated just how committed Williams was to his convictions and to seeing his vision of a civil and religiously free state through.<sup>108</sup>

Williams suggested to Winthrop that the head of each household would decide matters by majority rule, and that the young single men who came to live in Providence would be subject to their rulings without a vote. He stated that these men would be required "to subject ourselves in active or passive obedience to all such orders or agreements as shall be made for the public good of the body in an orderly way by the

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<sup>106</sup> Edwin S. Gaustad, *Roger Williams: Prophet of Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 23.

<sup>107</sup> Williams, *Papers of the Winthrop Family: Volume 3* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society)

<sup>108</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 310.

major consent of the present inhabitants—masters of families.”<sup>109</sup> This design is of course not a democracy, but more so an oligarchy in which the prominent men with established home and families would decide matters for everyone through a simple majority. It was a very basic governmental structure that residents were content with.

Williams’ views on limiting citizenship were noncontroversial for the time and not met with much resistance. The rights and privileges that came with being a citizen were not universally granted in any part of the world. Women were not eligible to become voting citizens and many adult men were also disenfranchised. However, unlike other governments, including the Bay Colony, Providence never limited citizenship to church members or required men to pass any sort of religious test. There was also no oath of spirituality required upon gaining freemanship. The constraints of becoming a citizen were in no way based on religion.<sup>110</sup>

Aside from taking God out of the final draft, another significant change that Williams made to his early governing document was to specify that the single men would agree to abide by the head of households’ decisions “only in civil things.”<sup>111</sup> This crucial qualification made it clear that the type of civil magistrates that existed in the Bay Colony, that heavily policed religious procedures, would not exist in Providence. This is entirely consistent with Williams’ cultivated beliefs and the vision he held for the colony. While living in the Bay Colony, he strongly and vocally opposed magistrates enforcing

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<sup>109</sup> Roger Williams, *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantation in New England* (Providence: Greene and Brother, State Printers, 1856), 14.

<sup>110</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 59.

<sup>111</sup> Williams, *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantation in New England*, 14.

the First Table of commandments on citizens. Providence would be different; The government would be concerned strictly with civil matters.<sup>112</sup>

The choice to separate the government from matters of religion was not without consequence, however. There were many questions and concerns imbedded in this choice. Among them was the fact that governments made a large amount of income on the fines they would levy on people who did not attend worship or abide by spiritual laws. This source of income would not be available to Providence. In full acknowledgement of the changes he was seeking to implement and the unknowns that accompanied them, Williams wrote to Winthrop: “I desire not to sleep in securitie and dreame of a Nest wch no hand can reach. I can not but expect changes, and the change of the last Enemie Death.”<sup>113</sup>

Williams was not inclined to idly content himself with the way things were, he desired to brave the discomforts that change brought in order to find a better way forward. A way that would drastically challenge the role of government and even the role of God in society. The most fundamental understanding of Puritan governing was that all authority came from God. Elected officials were not subject to the people, but rather to the will and desires of the divine. For societies like the Bay Colony, God was the epicenter of their personal, social, and governmental lives. Everything was done for reasons of faith and everything happened due to reasons of faith.

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<sup>112</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 68.

<sup>113</sup> Williams, *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, 6.

The Puritans' steadfast confidence in the authority of Christ stemmed in part from their belief that they had a covenant relationship with God, one that entitled them to the prospect of being part of the elect. They believed that those who were part of the elect or sainthood were preselected by God long ago to receive salvation, meaning that there was no way to earn or prevent your personal salvation on Earth. While this philosophy could have been reason enough to forsake religious practice, as no effort would have any effect on their eternal outlook, the Puritans came to see the prospect of predestination as a powerful incentive to live a model life: "No one could be entirely sure as to who was one of the elect, and yet, if a person was saved, he or she naturally lived a godly life."<sup>114</sup> As a result of this view, Puritans felt a compulsive and toxic need to flaunt their religious status and outshine their neighbor in order to illustrate that they were *visibly* preselected for salvation.

By taking the spiritual component out of government, Williams concluded that the authority of the government did not rest with God, but with the citizenry of the plantation. As there was no uniformed religion or understanding of God in Providence, officials were accountable to the will of the people in matters of governance and not their own personal and private faith. This not only cut away from Puritan beliefs, but also the broader English beliefs which stipulated that kings and queens were anointed leaders by God. It was a radical perspective that grew more mature and defined as Providence developed.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower* (London: Penguin Group Inc., 2006), 9.

<sup>115</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 315.

To launch a colony with no secure royal patent, no formal government, and no agreed religious structure was an unconventional and shocking route to take. All the colonies that came before had the benefit of established precedents to guide them. However, with his unofficial approach and extraordinary design, there was no such precedents for Williams to follow. He would have to chart his own path. In 1638, despite the overwhelming risks, those present in Providence signed the social document that Williams drafted. The precarious and fragile colony was publicly initiated.<sup>116</sup>

The concept of Williams' colony attracted many religious dissidents who had either left their colonies by choice or were banished for non-conformity, as well as newcomers from other countries. People across the spiritual spectrum made the journey to Providence in hopes of finding a place to peacefully settle and practice their faith. One such dissident that was drawn into the region was Anne Hutchinson. She was a bold, intelligent, and faithful woman who had run into her own bouts of trouble with Winthrop and the civil magistrates in Massachusetts. Publicly speaking out against the sermons being taught in Boston, she bolstered the position that that people attained salvation through personal devotion to God and not institutionalized fervor. This directly contradicted Puritan philosophy and angered magistrates who accused her of antinomianism, which was the controversial view that God's spirit had freed Christians from the need to follow established moral laws.

With her outspoken and contrary views, she could not be tolerated within the Bay Colony: "Threatened by her radical theology and her formidable political power, these

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<sup>116</sup> Hall, *Separating Church and State: Roger Williams and Religious Liberty*, 100.



men [Massachusetts magistrates] brought her to trial for heresy, banished her from the colony, and excommunicated her from the Puritan church.”<sup>117</sup> Hutchinson and her followers left without incident. Williams had no tolerance for antinomian principles, but he held a great deal of sympathy for their cause. He understood better than anyone what it was to be banished from the Bay Colony for reasons of conscience. Williams saw this as an opportunity to further cement his belief in religious tolerance and to strengthen the stability of the region. Those in Hutchinson’s group were wealthier than those who initially settled in Providence, so they would undoubtedly bring much needed families and resources to the area.<sup>118</sup>

Williams directed the group to Aquidneck Island, a large island about fifteen miles long and four miles wide, in Narragansett Bay. They found it to be a highly agreeable location. Williams then negotiated its sale from the Narragansetts. He later commented again on the fact that the natives sold the land out of friendship more than greed: “It was not Price nor Money that could have purchased Rhode Island.”<sup>119</sup> Aquidneck was known as Rhode Island to the locals, and would now serve as home for Hutchinson’s group of non-conformists.

Portsmouth was the name of the town that Hutchinson’s group would establish. A group of settlers from Portsmouth would soon construct the town of Newport on the other end of the island. Not long after Newport’s origin, a group of settlers from Providence

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<sup>117</sup> Eve LaPlante, *American Jezebel: the Uncommon Life of Anne Hutchinson* (New York: HarperOne, 2005), xvi.

<sup>118</sup> Gaustad, *Roger Williams: Prophet of Liberty*, 62.

<sup>119</sup> Williams, *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*, 485.

would erect a town named Warwick. The four settlements that existed in the Narragansett Bay area were all independently minded and host to strong passions, personalities, and religious opinions. Friction was inevitable as the settlements feuded internally as well as externally. Over the next few years, the settlements grew in population, but struggled to thrive. The name Rhode Island came to encompass the mainland, as well as Aquidneck Island, as people referred to all settlements as a unit.<sup>120</sup>

Each of the settlements held vastly different positions on religious issues, as well as civil issues. Those in Providence formed a Baptist congregation that also took in many Anglicans and Presbyterians. They typically agreed with Williams' vision of a strict separation of church and state. William Arnold, a resident of Providence, eventually broke from the colony to establish a small settlement of his own called Pawtuxet. He came to disagree with Williams' vision for Rhode Island and desired a return to the Bay Colony's style of governing. Samuel Groton, a three-time outcast and controversial figure even amongst Rhode Islanders, established Warwick on wildly mystical and strange religious principles right next to Pawtuxet. His followers brought their own distinctive perspectives to the already diverse Narragansett Bay layout, and vehemently opposed any notion of returning to the Bay approach of authority.<sup>121</sup>

Those in Portsmouth quickly divided themselves into two factions; One that favored a more conservative approach to governing and one that favored more radical tactics. Those who were more conservative desired to implement a familiar civil system,

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<sup>120</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 352.

<sup>121</sup> Irwin, Raymond Dye. "Saints, Sinners, and Subjects: Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in Transatlantic Perspective, 1636-1665." Order No. 9639257, The Ohio State University, 1996. 177.

one that mirrored the Bay Colony. However, those who were more radical, such as Hutchinson, sought a less orthodox way to govern. William Coddington was a Portsmouth resident and a strong advocate of the former. He and his followers passionately advocated for intervention from the Bay Colony, eventually separating from Portsmouth and forming Newport. Coddington was a former magistrate in Massachusetts and still held meaningful ties to the Boston Church. The odd and unpredicted mixture of personalities and views was volatile and not conducive to any form of productive unity.

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Religiously, there was of course no established congregation or church in Rhode Island. It was incumbent upon individuals to come together and establish a spiritual method on their own, with no help or intervention from the government. This was an oddity as churches were typically among the first buildings constructed and the first institutions to be launched when forming new colonies. In Rhode Island though, there was no physical church structure or expressive institution in place for people to comply with. That is not to say that church congregations did not form, as Rhode Island played host to many deeply religious groups.

Williams himself would come to construct a church in Providence. Centering in on his own personal beliefs, Williams came to reject the notion of infant baptism. He instead believed that only adults who can fully comprehend their commitment of faith should be allowed to be baptized in the church. He found others who shared this thought process and together they created the first Baptist church in America. He and his

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

followers would come to be known as Particular Baptists as they came to differ philosophically from Puritans only in their belief of infant baptism. Particular Baptists still confirmed to the idea of pre-destination and God electing people for salvation.<sup>123</sup> Even with all the similarities, Massachusetts was still intolerant and spiteful towards Particular Baptists. Their similar doctrines earned them no good favor.

The establishment of a church of likeminded people should have pleased Williams. In many ways it was what he had been searching for and trying to create for years. He was prone to deep introspection though, which caused him to come to question the truthfulness of not only his own church, but all churches. The concept of apostolic succession implied that God passed down his spiritual and sacramental authority to his apostles who then passed it on to their chosen successor, who were church leaders or bishops, who then passed it on down the line of consecutive church leaders. Williams found fault in this, as the succession of spiritual authority had filtered through the Church of England and ended up in the hand of bishops such as Laud: “He concluded that the succession had passed through such corruption that it must have been broken.”<sup>124</sup>

The authority given by God had been corrupted then, tainted by being passed to individuals who were spiritual frauds. This begged to question the validity of all churches, as they all followed the same line of succession. Williams determined that current line had been so corrupted that it was impossible to establish a church with the proper spiritual authority. It would take a divine intervention to purify the line of

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<sup>123</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 86-88.

<sup>124</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 364.

succession, which he knew may never occur in his lifetime. With this realization weighing heavily on his heart, he left the Baptist church and never attempted to create or join a church again.<sup>125</sup>

This must have been shattering decision for Williams. He had desired, fought for, and struggled to find a place of spiritual belonging for so many years, and now that he had the opportunity to create such a place he was derailed by the tenets of his conscience. At the same time though, this must have enforced more than ever his belief in the need for a full separation of church and state. He could never commit to any church now that he was of this mind, and he could never ask anyone else to either. The freedom to reject philosophy, to walk away from a church was paramount to his own personal spiritual inclinations.

Despite all the discrepancies and internal sources of hostility, the main dispute amongst Rhode Islanders was ultimately their various opinions regarding the Bay Colony and the role (if any) that it should have in Rhode Island. “The infighting among settlers in the communities of Providence, Portsmouth, Newport, and Warwick can be framed in terms of pro- and anti-Bay colony factions.”<sup>126</sup> Many of the inhabitants desired either strong intervention or total annexation from Boston authorities, or at the very least they desired for their community to be modeled after Massachusetts. Others opposed this idea, fearing a return to strict religious and social conformity. They argued that it was necessary, tenable, and prudent to separate spiritual matters from governmental affairs.

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<sup>125</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 365.

<sup>126</sup> Irwin, “Saints, Sinners, and Subjects: Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in Transatlantic Perspective, 1636-1665,” 177.

This was the fiercely contested debate that persistently divided residents during the formidable years of Rhode Island.

As religious radicals, persons of offensive character, and non-conformists poured into the region and failed to peacefully co-exist, other colonies looked to Rhode Island as a chaotic, defiled, and morally ruined community. A Dutch minister in the nearby colony of New Amsterdam, which was known for having a higher tolerance than some colonies, commented to his congregation about the type of people that venture into Rhode Island: “We suppose they went to Rhod island, for that is the receptacle of all sorts of riff-raff people, and is nothing else than the sewer of New England.... We suppose they will settle there, as they are not tolerated in any other place.... All the cranks of Newe England retire thither.”<sup>127</sup>

The nonstop animosity and strife present in Rhode Island, accompanied by the general confusion and lack of structure, created a hostile environment that supported depraved behavior. One member of Providence commented how “there was brawling continually in Mr. Williams’ meadow.”<sup>128</sup> Williams confided in a letter to Winthrop just how dire the situation was, stating that “our poor colony is in civil dissention.”<sup>129</sup> The growing pains of Rhode Island were certainly painful as Williams and other local leaders felt the disheartenment of all the internal challenges and weaknesses that plagued the colony.

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<sup>127</sup> Ola Winslow, *Master Roger Williams: A Biography* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 259.

<sup>128</sup> Hall, *Separating Church and State: Roger Williams and Religious Liberty*, 101.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

Religion was traditionally what joined people together. In Massachusetts and the broader English society, religion was closely intertwined with the government. It united citizens, set boundaries and expectations, imposed moral behavior, and structured society around common goals and values. Rhode Island, with its many conflicting religions and political stances, lacked this dependable attribute. This caused different religious factions to clash with one another in animosity, it confusingly blurred the lines of what should be a civil issue and what should be a religious matter, and it reared total social instability.

The volatility that plagued Rhode Island was not exclusively caused by internal disputes and quarrels, however. Outside sources also contributed to the unrest, exasperating the already desperate situation. The Bay Colony despised Rhode Island and its band of misfits. They looked to them as a wicked group of outcasts who disturbed the God ordained order of the region. Leaders in the Bay Colony felt compelled to push back against Williams and his immoral colony. Civil rules, general intolerance, and social conditions in the Bay Colony had only grown more intense in Williams' absence. Civil magistrates, under the direction of the new Salem pastor, searched the colony for Williams' sympathizers, which he put on trial and promptly excommunicated.<sup>130</sup>

The leaders in the Bay Colony felt the need to clean house after Williams' exploits. They wanted to purge the colony of not only sinful dissidents that still agreed with him, but also of any trace of his philosophy that may have remained after his departure. Winthrop wrote in his journal that the church in Salem was still "infected with

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<sup>130</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 356.

Mr. Williams and his teachings.”<sup>131</sup> One way in which this was accomplished was to eliminate the Puritan tradition of laymen prophesying, which was when church members were given the opportunity to stand up and vocalize their own personal thoughts and feelings on biblical texts as well as any spiritual occurrences.<sup>132</sup> This practice generally encouraged church discourse and opened the floor to religious musings and discussions.

However, Bay authorities tired of listening to laymen views and feared what could be said when they gave control to the people. Taking this element out of practice effectively silenced citizens in church and firmly discouraged them from discussing contrary views outside of church as well. Going one step further, leaders began to reach beyond their already immense influence from the pulpit to start enforcing laws that compelled conformity and submission. As the colony grew in population and became more stable, the government could really enforce their will instead of just relying on persuasion. The General Court of Massachusetts adopted the Body of Liberties in 1638. This governing document loosely followed the Magna Carta, but was of course more heavily infused with scripture and Godly instructions. It firmly stated: “No custome or prescription shall ever prevaile amongst us...that can be proved to bee morallie sinfull by the word of God.”<sup>133</sup>

The laws inside called for stringent punishments for any who violated the covenant of the church through sinful means. One directive stated: “If any person shall

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<sup>131</sup> Edmund J. Carpenter, *Roger Williams: a Study of the Life, Times and Character of a Political Pioneer* (New York: Grafton Press, 1909), 146.

<sup>132</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 405.

<sup>133</sup> William Staple, *The Proceedings of the First General Assembly of "The Incorporation of Providence Plantation": And the Code of Laws Adopted by that Assembly in 1647,* (Providence: Charles Burnett, 1847) 36.



blaspheme the Name of God the Father, Son, or Holy Ghost, with direct, expresse, presumptuous, or high-handed blasphemy, or shall curse God in like manner, he shall be put to death.”<sup>134</sup> Other offenses that were punishable by death included adultery and worshipping other Gods. The death penalty was rarely incited, however. Banishment, whipping, and public humiliation were among the more common punishments employed for civil and religious offenses. These were extreme penalties, even by English standards. To the Bay officials though, ensuring that citizens fully accepted their sin and publicly repented was crucial to operating a God fearing community.

This was liberty in the eyes of Winthrop and Massachusetts. Residents were free to live their lives as long as they lived within the bounds that that magistrates set for them. All good and productive citizens should want to please God and positively contribute to their community by following the stringent guidance of their religiously immersed governing body. The specific type of liberty that Massachusetts ascribed to was described by Winthrop as Natural liberty, which underscored the idea that absolute freedom was by nature evil and corrupt and that the only way to have true genuine liberty was though restricting freedom to only include what is good. Winthrop describes this concept as giving liberty “to that onely which is good,” and “to quietly and cheerfully submitt, vnto that Authoritye which is sett ouer you.”<sup>135</sup>

Massachusetts took this concept even further than just simply restricting the behaviors that were thought of as corrupt. They plunged into the details of citizens everyday lives and demanded uniformity and cooperation, even in matters that would not

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 589.

be considered sinful or bad. The magistrates concerned themselves with fashion choices, with the times that people would work, when they would go to bed, where they lodged, and how much money they were able to make. If they saw something that did not align with their Godly vision, they would legislate new restrictions or simply just come after the offending individuals without a legal reason.<sup>136</sup>

This was the Massachusetts that Williams had to contend with now. It was truly a community that had become warped with power and driven to extreme means by a misdirected sense of duty to God. There was no clear line indicating where civil responsibility ended, and religious responsibilities began. It was all baked into one all-powerful establishment that ruled over residents, dictating the ends and out of their lives and demanding conformity or death in the name of God. Williams' Rhode Island experiment was constructed not far from their borders, which deeply disturbed the congenial environment that they wanted to maintain. The temptation, disorder, and chaos that seemed to pour out of Rhode Island was taken as a threat and dealt with as such.

One of the biggest confrontations that would occur between Rhode Island and Massachusetts revolved around Samuel Gorton, the provocative Warwick settlement leader. From England to Massachusetts to Plymouth to Aquidneck Island to Providence to finally establishing his own settlement, he had a penchant for resisting authority, infuriating people, and inciting all types of drama. His overbearing personality and views elicited extreme responses from people; They either loved him or hated him. This caused rifts and instability to occur in the towns that he attempted to call home.

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<sup>136</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 362.

When Gorton resided in Providence for a short period of time, Williams commented to Winthrop that the residents “suck in his poyson” and willingly disregard his “uncivill and inhumane practices.”<sup>137</sup> Though Williams, unlike many others, had no objection to Gorton’s obscure religious practices, he did not care for the anarchy and tension that he would stir up. Though some people actively agreed with Gorton and followed his divisive thoughts, others found him extremely exasperating and dangerous. Among the latter group was William Arnold, a then resident of Providence who came to hold a great deal of contempt towards Gorton.<sup>138</sup>

After being banished from Massachusetts, Arnold was an early settler in Providence. Unlike many, he was not banished for religious reasons and did not care much for Williams’ concept of religious freedom. What he did care about though was being able to live in a community where he could make a profit off his land in peace. Arnold felt threatened by Gorton and his followers. Due to Gorton’s boisterous personality, questionable beliefs, and anarchic history, he felt certain that Gorton and all who followed him would cause havoc in the community. He stated that their “intent is...to get the victory over one part of the Town, but especially of those that laid the first foundation of the place, and bought it even almost with the losse of their lives.”<sup>139</sup>

He wrote a brief public memorandum to the town urging them to see sense and not accept Gorton into Providence. He argued what would happen if Gorton was allowed

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<sup>137</sup> Roger Williams, *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, 147.

<sup>138</sup> Irwin, “Saints, Sinners, and Subjects: Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in Transatlantic Perspective, 1636-1665,” 153.

<sup>139</sup> Chapin, ed., *Documentary History of Rhode Island*, 130.

to be admitted as a citizen: “Surely, first a breach of our civill peace and next a ruine of all such as are not on his side, as their daily practice doth declare; Ergo, they are not fit persons to be received into our Towne.”<sup>140</sup> He insisted that this was not a religious issue, but one of civility and politics. Gorton caused disruption and chaos that should not be tolerated, according to Arnold’s distressed plea.

Two distinct groups began to form in Providence; People who supported Gorton and people who support Arnold. Their opposition caused sparks to fly and tension to rise all over the settlement. Williams attempted to pacify both groups but lacked the tangible resources and strength to completely squash the situation. He attempted to bolster the authority of the small government body within Providence in order to deescalate the conflict. He was unable to satisfy the Arnold faction, however, who decided to appeal to Massachusetts for help. They stated that Providence had “no manner of honest order, or government,” and that the Gorton faction contained all manner of sinful behavior, “licentious lust,” and that they were “savage brute beasts” in their ways.<sup>141</sup>

Massachusetts authorities responded to the concerned Arnold faction by stating how if “they did submit themselves to some jurisdiction, either Plimouth or ours,” that they would be able to “protect them.”<sup>142</sup> Massachusetts leaders understood that they had no legal claim over the land or events that occurred outside of their borders. However, they saw this as an opportunity to be invited to intervene. An opportunity that would

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Winslow, *Hypocrisie Unmasked*, 54–56.

<sup>142</sup> Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 384.

allow them to finally quell the threat that had rested just beyond their domain for years now.<sup>143</sup>

Gorton eventually left Providence to create the settlement of Warwick. This move was a positive change. It put some much-needed space between Gorton and those he tended to clash with. Instead of feuding with authority figures, he now was the authority. He was free to create the type of town and government that pleased him and his followers, which relived people like Williams who were no longer vexed by his presence. Gorton and Williams came to be civil neighbors to one another. Despite their drastic differences in personalities and politics, at heart, they both supported the notion of religious liberty and wanted to see their settlements embrace it and thrive.

To Arnold, this move was more than just a reprieve from hostility, it was an opportunity to further his own interests. As there was no legal English charter, land sales and acquisitions were in general a tenuous situation in Rhode Island. There was quite a bit of a grey area in haggling with the natives for land, staking your claim, and legitimizing your purchase in the eyes of your fellow Englishmen. Arnold took advantage of the precarious nature of land dealings in the region by laying claim to a portion of land that belonged to Williams. He stated that he bought the land, even producing a falsified deed to the property.<sup>144</sup> A legal testimony by a William Fields indicated that Arnold took

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<sup>143</sup> Irwin, "Saints, Sinners, and Subjects: Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in Transatlantic Perspective, 1636-1665," 155.

<sup>144</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 373.

hold of the original deed and altered it: “[He] pasted the said writing together againe so Cunningly that it Could hardly bee discerned.”<sup>145</sup>

When his claims to Williams’ land, in which people had been settled on for years without contention or issue, failed to stick, he turned to other complex land holdings in the Warwick area. As acquiring the tracts of land that he wanted was proving to be a daunting task, Arnold began to see the possibility of personally benefiting from submitting to the Massachusetts authorities. If he were to invite them to intervene, Massachusetts would claim jurisdiction and preside over any land disputes involving Pawtuxet (where Arnold was) and Warwick. This undoubtedly meant that he would receive the land that he wanted without issue.

The consequences of inviting the Bay into Rhode Island could be devastating for Williams. The fact that they threatened to destroy his dream of building a religious free community was of little concern to Arnold, however. As long as he received his property, he was not bothered by this prospect. Religious freedom and a tolerant society were never his motivation or mission in life. As such, he and others formally submitted themselves to the authority of the Bay in 1642.

Winthrop, now the governor once again, thoughtfully considered Arnold’s plea for help. Pawtuxet could only be reached by going through Providence. If they were to operate under the guise of aiding a distressed Arnold, Winthrop and others keenly observed that they could furtively absorb control of all of Rhode Island. Winthrop wrote that it was a chance to “draw in...those parts which had become very offensive” and that

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<sup>145</sup> William Field, *Providence Town Papers*: 01293, (Providence: *Documentary History of Rhode Island*), 63.

they thought it “was wisdom not to let it slip.”<sup>146</sup> Once Massachusetts’ intentions with Pawtuxet became public knowledge, it emboldened other colonies to encroach on the vulnerable Narragansett Bay land as well. Plymouth and Connecticut both began to aggressively pursue way of snatching land in the region.<sup>147</sup>

The pending arrival of Massachusetts authorities, along with the invasion of other colonies, created a scene of utter panic in Rhode Island. Residents lived in fear of Bay Colony officials. Many had come to experience their cruelty and vindictive nature firsthand, parting with them on terrible terms. The thought of returning to their brutal governance was harrowing. Rhode Island was far from perfect, but at the very least it offered a shelter for the persecuted. A place where the outcasted and undesirable could live largely unashamed and spiritually free. If Rhode Island were to falter, that was it. They knew that they would have no where else to go.

Local leaders accepted their vulnerability and fully acknowledged that they were no match for the force of the Bay Colony. They were weak in numbers, resources, and unity, which made them weak in conflict. What they needed was a legal charter that would strengthen their resolve, make them official in the eyes of England, and force outside colonies to acknowledge their permanence. With this critical thought in mind, representatives from Portsmouth and Newport “ordered that a Committee shall be

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<sup>146</sup> Winthrop, *Journal of John Winthrop*, 413.

<sup>147</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 107.

appointed to consult about the procuration of a patent for this island and Islands, and lands adjacent.”<sup>148</sup>

The choice of who to send to England to procure the patent was obvious. Roger Williams was matchless in his legal knowledge and connections in London. He was also matchless in his passion and determination to see this colony endure and flourish. Had he returned to England when he was originally banished, he would likely be rotting in a cell, but much had changed in England since then. As such, in the spring of 1643, Williams boarded a ship back to London with a purpose and a prayer. He was now the only hope for all the liberty loving people in Rhode Island.

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<sup>148</sup> Roger Williams, *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantation in New England*, 125.



## CHAPTER V

### The Permanence of Rhode Island

During Williams' absence from England, King Charles and Laud continued their cruel pattern of abuse. Charles collected taxes without the consent of parliament, and he morphed the Star Chamber, which was intended to be a court of equity, into a mechanism of personal power. Laud intensified his attacks on Puritans, even going so far as to make immigration to America illegal. The constant pressure to religiously conform, the unlawful taxing, and the forceful ways that regulations were put into action wore the nation down. Charles and Laud eventually pushed too far.

In 1639, Charles and Laud attempted to impose the Book of Common Prayer and other rituals from the Anglican High Church onto Scotland. The Scottish, being predominantly Presbyterian, rebelled against this order. The conflict quickly escalated into full blown war as the two countries, both ruled by the same king, fought with one another internally. The English army was no match for the Scottish, who were highly trained in combat and even acted as mercenaries. The English had to retreat, which led to the Scots occupying most of northern England.<sup>149</sup>

Charles intended to raise money to secure an army and the necessary materials to snuff out this growing rebellion. He knew that he needed Parliament's help in order to obtain these funds. The problem was that Charles had caused a large rift between the crown and Parliament when he dismissed them years prior, vowing never to call them

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<sup>149</sup> Carpenter, *Roger Williams: a Study of the Life, Times and Character of a Political*, 178.

into session again. Unfortunately, he now needed their support to substantially tax the nation in order to defeat the evolving mutiny. Parliament was not willing to be cooperative, though. They did not agree with prolonging the war with the Scots and would not help Charles obtain the resources he requested. Tensions from all involved parties intensified until eventually Charles formally declared war on parliamentary forces, effectively launching the English Civil War in 1642.<sup>150</sup>

This devastating and baffling environment of internal feuding was the England that Williams would return to. The war undoubtedly complicated Williams' quest to obtain a legal charter for Rhode Island. The king had fled the London area for Oxford due to safety concerns, which left Parliament in charge by default. Williams was fine to take up his issue with Parliament, as he knew and was in good favor with a few of the people seated, which could help sway opinions in his direction. Parliament was clearly preoccupied with the war raging on, however. Williams' request was not a priority for them while their whole nation was in a state of turmoil. He understood that he would need to be patient and persistent in this matter.

While he waited for the chance to present his patent request, he did not just sit idly by. He found several tasks to keep himself occupied. For one, he was able to write on several projects, including *Key*, which was printed and incredibly popular. He was also able to reconnect with family, even becoming engrossed in a legal battle that affected his mother's estate. He also devoted some of his time that winter to helping Parliament find alternative sources of fuel for London, as the king was hoarding the nation's coal supply

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<sup>150</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 109-111.

in Oxford. Certainly the most engaging and personal matter that he attend to in London was the business of Parliament reshaping the English government.<sup>151</sup>

Williams saw Parliament's control of England and their bartering with Scotland against Charles and Laud as an opportunity to introduce his concepts of religious freedom to the precariously positioned government. English officials were actively meeting with Scottish representatives to try to find a religious middle ground that would please all involved, and ward off the growing threat of new religious fads. While most saw the solution as compromises being made by both religious factions, Williams saw the solution as a full embrace of religious liberty. He published a short memorandum called *Queries of Highest Consideration*, where he laid out his argument for the English government to adopt religious freedom moving forward.<sup>152</sup>

In *Queries* Williams presented a series of provocative questions that he felt the English people deserved answers to. He acknowledged that his work would not be popular and would in fact be met with disdain by stating in the first paragraph that people in power are seldom willing to "hear any other music but what is known to please them."<sup>153</sup> Due to the confrontational and brash nature of this work and his desire to stay in good favor with Parliament, he chose to publish it anonymously.

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<sup>151</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 415.

<sup>152</sup> Gaustad, *Roger Williams: Prophet of Liberty*, 86.

<sup>153</sup> Roger Williams and James Calvin, *On Religious Liberty: Selections from the Works of Roger Williams* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 74.

Williams asserted that the English had walked this road of forced religious conformity for years and that it had always ended in bloodshed and devastation. From Henry VIII forcing all to cease Catholic practices and conform to the Church of England to Edward VI demanding citizens become Calvinist or feel the wrath of the state to Mary I ruthlessly demanding that all switch back to Catholicism, and so on through Elizabeth I, James I, Charles I, and now Parliament. Williams questioned when the carnage of forced conversions would end. He stated: “We query whether the blood of so many hundred thousand of Protestants, mingled with the blood of so many thousand papists, be not a warning to us?”<sup>154</sup>

Williams passionately contended that England was washed with the blood of hundreds of thousands of innocent people who perished due to “spiritual rape” of conscience at the hand of the government.<sup>155</sup> He fervently argued that it was time to bring the vicious cycle to an end. Parliament could take the bold steps forward if it chose to. He concluded his work with a few parting thoughts or queries, reiterating that religious persecution was a cruel violation of Christian and human ethics, that it hindered genuine conversion, that religious warfare had been the curse of civilizations, and that those who are forced to embrace a faith that their “hearts embrace not” are violated in a deeply personal manner.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Roger Williams and James Calvin, *On Religious Liberty: Selections from the Works of Roger*, 80.

<sup>155</sup> Roger Williams and James Calvin, *On Religious Liberty: Selections from the Works of Roger*, 78.

<sup>156</sup> Roger Williams and James Calvin, *On Religious Liberty: Selections from the Works of Roger*, 84.

Sadly, but predictably, Parliament was not convinced by Williams' edicts. They soon passed legislations that set strict rules for Sunday attendance and observance, including no sports, games, trade, or travel. They required all to prescribe to the permitted worship methods. Preaching would only be allowed by those who were licensed by the state, and individual congregations were not allowed to deviate from the approved worship and teaching components.<sup>157</sup> The fact that Parliament appeared to be not much different than the king in terms of religious dictation must have concerned Williams, who still needed their approval for his spiritually free colony in America.

Convincing Parliament would not be the only hurdle that Williams would have to overcome to secure his patent, however. It would seem the combative attitudes of Massachusetts would follow him to England in the form of Thomas Weld and Hough Peter. Both men hailed from the Bay Colony; Weld was the one who cross-examined Williams at his trial and Peter was who replaced Williams in the Salem church. They had traveled to England the year prior as agents of the Bay to protect the interests of Massachusetts in Parliament. The rise of Puritan power within Parliament meant changes that effected those living in America as well as England. The biggest effect was that of economic downturn. As the living condonations for Puritans vastly improved in England, less Puritans moved to America and more moved back. This left a very negative impact on the fragile Massachusetts economy.

Weld and Peter were sent to London to remedy this unfortunate situation. They found a lot of success in this mission, securing good favor and fortune for Massachusetts

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<sup>157</sup> Gaustad, *Roger Williams: Prophet of Liberty*, 88.

within Parliament and London society. They were able raise upwards of three thousand pounds to send back to the Bay during a time of scarce resources and funds. They were also able to secure a halt on many of the trade taxes that were previously levied on the colony, which really helped to make up some of the trade deficit. Weld and Peter gradually became involved, known, and respected individuals within the English government. They were even trusted to negotiate financial support from Holland for the war effort.<sup>158</sup>

While living in the city and working closely with Parliament, Weld and Peter came to find that Williams was in London seeking a legal charter for Rhode Island. Both men had firsthand knowledge of Williams' past with the Bay Colony, as well as the perceived immoral and troubling nature of his settlement. As active and loyal agents of the Bay, they felt it was their responsibility to protect their colony's interests while in London. This was not limited to securing funds and certainly included hindering or better yet preventing Rhode Islanders from what they saw as the further tarnishing of the New England region.

When Parliament established a Committee on Foreign Plantations, which had the authority to "assign...their aforementioned authority and power; and in such manner, and to such persons, as they shall judge to be fit, for the better governing and preserving of the said plantations and islands," Weld and Peter jumped on the opportunity to snatch the

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<sup>158</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 388.

Rhode Island territory from Williams' grasp<sup>159</sup>. Without waiting for approval from Boston, Weld sought a charter that would grant control of Providence, Newport, Portsmouth, Pawtuxet, Shawomet, and all other occupied areas around Narragansett Bay to Massachusetts. If successful, this would effectively bring an end to Rhode Island as it was. Williams and all of those who had come to support his vision would be once again met with the tyranny of the Bay.

Weld lobbied hard, approaching members of Parliament individually, as well as collectively. Beyond having a casual or informal conversation about a possible charter for Massachusetts, he would forwardly ask them to sign a proposed charter agreement on the spot. After successfully convincing nine members of Parliament to sign it, he backdated the document to make it appear as if it had been officially voted on. This document would be known as the "Narragansett patent." However, for a any charter to be legally binding it had to pass through the floor of the committee with a majority vote. After the vote, the charter would have to be probably enrolled and receive official stamps and tender.<sup>160</sup>

Without executing the proper legal procedure, Weld's Patent had no real authority. It was clumsily constructed and not very believable to anyone who had a basic understanding of proper charters. While not truly valid, it did give authorities in Massachusetts a new way to claim jurisdiction in New England. English courts were conveniently thousands of miles away, which made it impossible for Parliament to either

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<sup>159</sup> W. K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), 52.

<sup>160</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 151.

enforce or reject the validity of the charter. Weld undoubtedly complicated matters for Williams. He had prematurely poisoned members of Parliament against him by having them commit to the dissenting view, including Warwick, who was the chair of the committee. Warwick's vote was required to secure the charter, even if a majority voted against him.<sup>161</sup>

Despite Weld's detrimental interference, Williams was not deterred from his goal. He decided to stay the course and continue to fight for a legal patent for Rhode Island. He began to regularly attend Parliament hearings that dealt with religion, he routinely held open gatherings and lectures on religious freedom for anyone who would listen, and he went out of his way to make connections with influential members of Parliament. Williams was determined to obtain the patent, even if it meant practicing patience and playing the long game. He understood that there was no other alternative, as returning to Rhode Island empty handed meant abandoning his spiritual haven and handing it over to the Bay Colony.

A perhaps surprising occurrence that wound up bolstering Williams' case came in the form of a published private letter. Around the time that Weld was concocting his fraudulent patent, a letter that Cotton wrote to Williams became anonymously published. It was printed without the consent of Cotton or Williams and became widely distributed around London and the surrounding areas. People in England were often engrossed by the events that occurred in New England, so most already had some knowledge of Williams'

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<sup>161</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 416.



contentious split from Massachusetts. When a letter was released that expressed Cotton's contempt for Williams it quickly became a best seller.<sup>162</sup>

In the letter, that was written shortly after Williams was banished, Cotton conveyed to Williams his opinion of him and the situation he created. He stated that "you have banished yourself" and that, if he died, "your bloode had been on your owne head."<sup>163</sup> It was a brutal letter that cast Cotton and the Bay government in a very unflattering light. Cotton's words were viewed as uncalled for and inappropriate given that Williams was banished for theological differences and not any dangerous crime. Readers of the letter grew very weary and unsympathetic towards Massachusetts as a whole.

Williams capitalized on this sentiment by publishing a pamphlet titled *Mr. Cotton's Letter Examined and Answered*. In it he walked readers through the trials that he endured under Massachusetts leadership, poignantly illustrating how they were unethical in matters of both church and state. He depicted the unjust and cruel nature of being banished into the cold wilderness as being "denyed the common aire to breath in, and a civill cohabitation upon the same common earth; yea and also without mercy and humane compassion be exposed to winter miseries in a howling Wildernes?"<sup>164</sup> He hoped to lead readers to the conclusion that the actions of Massachusetts warranted sanctioning, not more power and property through the absorption of Rhode Island.

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<sup>162</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 473.

<sup>163</sup> Sargent Bush, *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 211-225.

<sup>164</sup> Williams, *On Religious Liberty: Selections from the Works of Roger Williams*, 62.

His appeal to the sentiments of his fellow Englishmen seemed to work. Public opinion, as well as the opinion of the Committee of Foreign Plantation, turned against Massachusetts for their erroneous actions. Williams wasted no time capitalizing on the swing of attitude in his direction. He confronted the committee and Warwick directly, imploring them to not only grant him the charter, but to specifically allow it to continue to exist as a religiously free state. Williams keenly pitched the idea of Rhode Island as a test in religious freedom, an active experiment that would safely occur thousands of miles from English shores. The whole world could wait, watch, and take the results as they wish.<sup>165</sup>

After some time and thought, Warwick agreed to reverse his previous view on the charter. The committee was called to order and Williams received his fully legal and accredited charter. This was a huge win for Williams and liberty loving people everywhere. The charter specifically granted:

“Full Powre & Authority to Governe & rule themselves, and such others as shall hereafter Inhabite within any part of the said Tract of land, by such a form of Civil Government, as by voluntary consent of all, or the greater Part of them shall find most suteable to their Estates & Conditions.”<sup>166</sup>

By allowing *the greater part* or the majority of the colony to establish the laws and government, the committee was allowing democracy to prevail. The people of Rhode

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<sup>165</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, 426.

<sup>166</sup> “Parliamentary Patent, 1643”, Rhode Island State Archives, accessed 2020, <https://www.sos.ri.gov/divisions/civics-and-education/for-educators/themed-collections/rhode-island-charter>

Island would be free to dictate how their society would operate, both spiritually and civilly.

The English government must have been intrigued by Williams' model of separation to allow it to persist in an official capacity. The charter stated that the efforts of the settlers "may in time by the blessing of God upon their endeavors Lay a surer foundation of hapines to all America."<sup>167</sup> Whether it overcame the odds to succeed or predictably failed, Rhode Island was viewed as an opportunity to learn something new about religion, civility, and governance. There was no other society in the world that functioned with as much liberty and self-autonomy as Rhode Island would. This made it remarkable and interesting to all who knew of it. It also had the added benefit of providing a place for religious dissenters and other undesirable persons to exist in the colonies.

Before Williams would depart for home, bringing the good news of England's blessing with him, he would first put ink to paper once more in order to author his most known and influential work: *The Bloudy Tenent, of Persecution, for cause of Conscience, discussed in A Conference betweene Truth and Peace*. In this notable treatise, Williams outlined his entire argument for religious freedom and separation of church and state. He would venture to take readers through his own thought process, illustrating to them the dangerous reality of religious persecution and governments like Massachusetts who control and dominate citizens from the pulpit. His goal was to persuade people to

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

understand that a fully separated and civil government was not only possible, but the best possible course of action.

Williams in part illustrated the perils of governments who mingled powers of church and state by sharing his own experiences of Massachusetts and of being banished. He reiterated the unwarranted and unjust nature of being banished for possessing differing beliefs. While he conceded that he could comprehend being exiled from a church for harboring different philosophies, he could not see any way to justify banishing a person from a colony for this reason alone. He stated that it was an act committed “without mercy or human compassion.”<sup>168</sup>

Williams argued that his cruel and abusive behavior was possible because Massachusetts had the religious and civil components of its government so tightly intertwined. Williams really drew from his own personal experiences to help center his argument. He was able to convey the intense emotions and suffering that he endured by being on the receiving end of religious persecution, which humanized his claims and gave him the credibility to speak to its horror.

Williams then addressed the structure of Massachusetts’ government and how it was wrought with corruption. In theory, New England made the magistrates supreme in civil affairs and the church supreme in spiritual affairs. Williams granted that there was nothing wrong with this system. However, in practice the Bay Colony gave the magistrates authority over religious practices and doctrines as part of their civil duties. This essentially gave magistrates the same type of authority that the king had in being

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<sup>168</sup> Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience Discussed: and Mr. Cotton's Letter Examined and Answered* (London: Printed for the Society by J. Haddon, 1848), xxii.

named the head of the church. Williams contended that giving officials this much power was absurd and created an environment where abuse could easily occur and go unchecked. He relented: “What is this in true plain English but to make him the Judge of the true and falfe Church, Judge of what is truth, and what errour.”<sup>169</sup>

If the government had the power to force people to attend church services, what was stopping them from compelling citizens to fully convert? Williams ardently spoke out about the injustice in forcing people to practice a faith that contradicted their conscience. He stated that people who are pressed to exercise a conflicting religion suffer in “guilt of their hypocrisy” and that “they are forced to be of no Religion all their dayes”<sup>170</sup> The pressure to either sacrifice all personal spiritual convictions or become a martyr for them was too great of a burden on the soul. It devastated individuals, leaving them feeling emotionally unsatisfied and duplicitous, which did not lead to fulfilled and happy lives.

Williams maintained that the freedom to select your own religion was a personal matter and an innate right. He stated that “Gods people must enjoy their Liberty of Conscience and not be forced” to endure a faith that they contend against.<sup>171</sup> Williams saw the ability to practice any belief and pursue God by any means as a right freely given by God, not by the government. True religious liberty was different from religious toleration, which granted some leeway to Protestants and Christians in matters of faith. What Williams called for, and believed that God desired, was religious liberty with no

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<sup>169</sup> Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, 350.

<sup>170</sup> Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, 302.

<sup>171</sup> Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, 395.

exclusions or bounds: “It is the will and command of God, that a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or Ant-Christian conscience and worships, bee granted to all men in all Nations and Countries.”<sup>172</sup>

Furthermore, as it is God’s design and command that everyone express their spirituality freely, the church that does not abide by this command is not a true Christian church. For they definitely disregard this charge, firmly striking against “the spirit and mind and practice of the Prince of peace.” Additionally, Williams asserted that the practice of religious persecution has destroyed the peace and prosperity of many civilizations and kingdoms.<sup>173</sup> The senseless slaughtering, wrecking of harmony, and fighting on the grounds of spiritual superiority does not please God, who “shed his own for his bloodiest enemies.”<sup>174</sup> God cares for all his people and does not relish in seeing them destroy each other in his name.

The only way to ensure that people had the ability to fully exercise this God-given right, to safeguard communities from suffering mindless spiritual wars and bloodshed, and to end the reprehensible display of religious preeminence that shamed God was to take all control of religious matters away from the government. There needed to be a total and strict separation of religious and civil concerns. Williams stated that “no man for gainsaying Christ, or joining with the enemy anti-christ, should be molested with the civil sword.”<sup>175</sup> *Civil sword* refers to the rigid government actions taken against citizens who

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<sup>172</sup> Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, 26.

<sup>173</sup> Gaustad, *Roger Williams: Prophet of Liberty*, 92.

<sup>174</sup> Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, 188.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

violate laws, ordinances, or mores. The implication of this statement being that religious leaders should not be involved in civil concerns and vice versa.

Williams stated that England could construct a new Magna Carta “of highest liberties” that would uphold this division, and save Englishmen from being met with the civil sword due to issues of faith.<sup>176</sup> If the English could set this separation into law and devote themselves to preserving it, then “the doleful drums, and shrill-sounding conscience trumpets, the roaring, murdering cannons, the shouts of conquerors, the groans of wounded, dying, slaughtered righteous with the wicked” would be diminished and lasting peace could be found.<sup>177</sup>

When others could not even fathom it, Williams could so clearly envision a world where people co-existed and found harmony despite religious difference. He declared that it was this “heavenly invitation” of peace and prosperity that made him “bold” in his quest.<sup>178</sup> He truly believed that a peaceful existence was sustainable and attainable, if only people would be brave enough to open their eyes to the destruction and wickedness of religious persecution and the rich possibilities of spiritual freedom. He contended that a government could achieve this *heavenly* environment of liberty through radically changing the relationship between the closely connected church and state.

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

In the last stretch of the *Bloudy Tenent* Williams laid out exactly how the church and the state should relate to one another in a religiously free society. He began by blatantly stating that:

“Magistrates, as magistrates, have no power of setting up the form of church government, electing church officers, punishing with church censures... And on the other side, the churches, as churches, have no power though as members of the commonweal they may have power, of erecting or altering forms of civil government, electing of civil officers, inflicting civil punishments.”<sup>179</sup>

The church and the government should operate in totally separate spheres within society. Each should be responsible for different tasks and neither should have the authority to intrude or interfere with the other’s domain.

Williams believed that civil magistrates had a vital role to fill in society, one that was designed by God even. He never wished to do away with them or diminish their capacity to the point of making them ineffective or useless. But unlike the majority of his English peers, he did not think that magistrates were appointed by God to fulfill a higher spiritual calling that placed them in the purview of religious concerns.<sup>180</sup> He felt that it was natural law and *not* divine law that gave civil magistrates their authority and purpose, being of faith or not had no bearing on a magistrate’s power: “This civil nature of the

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<sup>179</sup> Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, 214.

<sup>180</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 147.



magistrate we have proved to receive no addition of power from the magistrate being a Christian, no more than it receives diminution from his not being a Christian.”<sup>181</sup>

Williams stressed that magistrates should be tasked with enforcing the Second Table of commandments, which is a biblical concept that deals with the sinful behavior that does not directly relate to religion but that causes undo harm to others. He explains that “the object of [magistrates] is the commonweal, or safety of such a people in their bodies and goods.”<sup>182</sup> He references Romans 13 as being the inspiration for this view of magistrates. In this passage from the Bible, God calls people to “be subjects of the governing authorities” for they are part of an institution established by God, and to expect punishment for disobedience. This biblical passage also instructs dutiful citizens to pay taxes to support their magistrates. Williams agrees to this directive by asserting that this form of revenue should be “payable by all sorts of men, natives and foreigners, who enjoy the same benefit of public peace and commerce in the nation.”<sup>183</sup> In other words, no man should be exempt from contributing to the financial funding of their local magistrates.

In Williams’ worldview, magistrates and the broader government were designed to act as “the eyes, and hands, and instruments of the people.”<sup>184</sup> It is the people that give the government power, not God. As such, it is the people that magistrates are subject to and the people who can alter their authority: “If magistrates have received their power

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<sup>181</sup> Williams, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, 304

<sup>182</sup> Williams, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, 305.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

from the people, then the greatest number of the people of every land has received from Christ Jesus a power to establish, correct, reform.”<sup>185</sup> This was a very democratic and progressive view. One that would make a reappearance in the work of political philosophers like Hobbes or Rousseau in the coming decades. To declare that the government derived its power from the people and that a majority could change the capacity and function of the government, without input from the church, was a striking and provocative statement.

Essentially, citizens should expect magistrates to “sheath up the sword of persecution in doctrines of repentance, or faith, or holiness of heart and life, and hope of glorious and eternal union to come.”<sup>186</sup> The sword should only be used to amiably and impartially deliver justice and keep the peace. It should be considered unconscionable for authorities to persecute people based on their own biases, religious or other. If they fail at this task, then citizens have the power and obligation to come together and democratically rescind their control.

Williams, along with a minority of others who were embroiled in similar controversies due to the English Civil War, truly believed that religious freedom and separation of church and state was the only way forward. This model of society would promote civility and peace, while religious involvement in politics and untoward persecution would continue to destroy all amity. Williams’ advocacy of this position did not mean that he was without faith, careless about spiritual matters, or against religion. Contrarily, he was a deeply introspective and spiritual man. He whole heartedly supported religious institutions and believed in their purpose and presence in

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Williams, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, 175.

communities. Additionally, it was his own personal spirituality, interpretation of the Bible, and understanding of Christian ethics that led him to believe that God was against religious persecution.

However, as important as faith was to him and as big of a role as it played in his life, he came to see the church as any other company that operated within society. The church was not without flaws and not immune to weaknesses and failings. Williams stated that the church “may dissent, divide, break into schisms and factions, sue and implead each other at the law, yea, wholly break up and dissolve into pieces and nothing.”<sup>187</sup> In Williams’ mind, the church could not be depended upon to provide stable and consistent governmental guidance and oversight. There were just too many emotions involved, too many diverging opinions, too many everchanging dynamics, and too many opportunities for implosion.

Williams felt that a more secure and lasting society could be achieved by constructing a government that was completely uninvolved in church concerns. That way, if the church did falter and collapse, the government would still be there to provide a point of unity and stability for people. He stated that in the event of the church failing “the peace of the city not be in the least measure impaired or disturbed; because the essence or being of the city, and so the well being and peace thereof, is essentially distinct from those particular societies.”<sup>188</sup> The ability of Williams, as a man of robust faith, to be able to recognize the imperfections of the church and call for a better system

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<sup>187</sup> Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, 46.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

is a true testament to his capacity to pragmatically analyze a situation and fearlessly embrace change for the better. A trait that he perhaps gleaned from Bacon.

The temptation to remain in England must have been abundant for Williams. He was in the industrious and sophisticated city that he grew up in, surrounded by people he respected and admired. There were plenty of opportunities for him to improve his station and advance within the realm of politics, which he clearly had a genuine love and passion for. He could have easily sent for his family and made a comfortable life for himself in England. Yet, he made the choice to return to the bare, primitive, and problem-ridden Rhode Island. He could not abandon the dreams he had for creating the society that he so vividly depicted in his book. He was more determined now than ever to prove that a separated state could thrive.

## CHAPTER VI

### The Legacy of Roger Williams

*The Bloody Tenent* was published and began circulating London while Williams made his journey home, which provided him a comfortable distance from the reaction and fall out of his work. His inflammatory rhetoric and bold statements were met with shock and repudiation across London. The outrage and scandal that the book stirred up piqued curious minds, causing it to be widely purchased and read across England. Parliament met to discuss Williams' work and collectively agreed that it was a spiteful and dangerous piece of literature.

Despite the strong and passionate argument that Williams made in ink, they maintained the opinion that toleration was a treacherous notion that would bring God's wrath upon England. Those in power knew that they could not risk the expansion of this perilous opinion, so it was decided that every copy, including the typeset, would be collected and burned.<sup>189</sup> This book burning would send a strong and clear message to all that the government was revulsed and utterly condemned the ideas expressed in Williams' work. The hope was to stop the book from being consumed by anyone else and to make it clear to those who had read it that they were not to agree or act on any of its salacious notions.

In a sermon delivered by Lazarus Seaman, following the burning, he upheld the actions of Parliament and intensely agreed that toleration was a depraved notion. He listed several books that propped up the idea of religious freedom and toleration,

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<sup>189</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, 467.

including Williams' recent work, and suggested that the notion must be altogether snuffed out. He warned all Englishmen to stay vigilant against the spreading of these ideas, as there was a distinct chance that Williams' words would be resurrected: "The shell is sometimes throwne into the fire, when the kernel is eaten as a sweet morsel."<sup>190</sup>

While most did not have a taste for Williams' ideas, there was a small minority that did agree with his perspective and could not stand to have his powerful ideas turn to ash. Between 1644 and 1649, pamphlets directly addressing Williams' ideas, ten that mirrored his ideas without crediting him, and at least one hundred and twenty that quoted his *Bloudy Tenent* appeared in and around London.<sup>191</sup> Despite the best efforts of those in the government, Williams undoubtedly left a lasting impression on England. His work endured long past the fateful book burning and would eventually enter mainstream society.

Williams reached American shores in September of 1644. He arrived at port in Boston armed with a formal letter written and signed by a member of Parliament. This letter instructed Massachusetts magistrates to allow the *banished* Williams to travel freely back to Rhode Island.<sup>192</sup> Despite the cold greeting he initially received, a much warmer welcome awaited him in Providence. Citizens gathered around and greeted him with every bit of stored up anticipation and reverence that they felt. They had waited two years for him to not only return but return with good news. And he did not disappoint. He was

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<sup>190</sup> Winslow, Ola Elizabeth, *Master Roger Williams*, 200.

<sup>191</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, 469-470.

<sup>192</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 21.

able to present to them an official charter that would hopefully free them from the constant threat of invasion that Massachusetts posed.

He had been given the opportunity that he had dreamed about for years; the ability to create a free and separate society. Now he just had to prove that his dream could be successfully turned into a reality. Though Massachusetts could no longer legally obtain any Rhode Island property, they still relentlessly antagonized the colony. The thought of Williams' wild and morally corrupt colony being legitimized and existing so close to their righteous *city upon the hill* sickened them. Even Winthrop, who at the best of times was like a wise father figure for Williams and at the worst was still cordial, was now giving him the cold shoulder. Now that Williams' fantasy was materializing, Winthrop could no longer abide offering the same level of support towards his old friend.<sup>193</sup>

Williams later recalled that he had often been "charged with folly for that freedom and liberty I have always stood for."<sup>194</sup> Being stonewalled and tormented by those around him for his beliefs was something that he sadly grew accustomed to. However, the presumed loss of Winthrop's friendship hit Williams differently, more deeply. In a letter that he composed to Winthrop upon returning to Rhode Island he plead with him that they might still maintain their close bond. He stated that he feared "that all the Sparkes of former love are now extinct" and ended with "sir, you have no truer friend and servant to your worthy person."<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, 483.

<sup>194</sup> Roger Williams, *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, 263.

<sup>195</sup> Roger Williams, *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*, xxxv.

Williams and Winthrop shared a tense connection. They fundamentally disagreed on many spiritual sectors and ideas of governance, they experienced a strained parting due to Williams' banishment, and they were politically pitted against one another. Yet, they still communicated with one another regularly and would frequently speak in flattering tones regarding one another. Williams trusted and relied on Winthrop's judgment and wisdom when it came to constructing and sustaining a colony, even if he disagreed with his views on spirituality. For his part, Winthrop thought highly of Williams prior to his falling out with the Bay Colony. His fondness for Williams did not abruptly end after his expulsion from the colony, he continued to admire and desire to nurture his positive traits. However, an ulterior motive likely emerged. As Williams ventured to construct Rhode Island, Winthrop most likely desired to keep tabs on his progress, attempt to influence his choices, and possibly even disrupt or undercut his success.

Despite the palpable loss of friendship and respect that he felt from Winthrop and others and the continued defiance from Massachusetts, Williams pushed on and began formatting the now legitimate and united Rhode Island Colony. In May of 1647, representatives of Providence, Portsmouth, and Warwick met to discuss what their legal code and constitution would look like moving forward. Williams led the Providence representatives. Their goal was to create a society in which every citizen could have "peaceable and quiet enjoyment of his lawful right and Libertie."<sup>196</sup> The documents

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<sup>196</sup> Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1636–1792* (Providence: Crawford Greene and Brother, 1856) 156.



forged from this three-day assembly would create the freest, most progressive, and most liberal society in the world.<sup>197</sup>

Much of the legal code mirrored that of the typical English system. The penalty for transgressions such as treason, homicide, rape, robbery, burglary, arson, larceny, and conspiracy all adhered to the long-accepted and prescribed English legal procedure. Sodomy and bestiality were also outlawed and punishable by death. Adultery and fornication remained criminal offenses, though no punishment was specified. Instead the legal code stated that the “penalty the state of England has of shall appoint” would suffice for these charges.<sup>198</sup>

The drafters did see it fit to update some aspects to better fit their colony, however. The typical legal standards did not meet all the needs and desires of Rhode Island’s progressive attitude. For instance, the Rhode Island drafters stipulated that no debtor could be imprisoned for debt, as they would just “lie languishing to no man’s advantage” in prison.<sup>199</sup> The refusal to imprison people for debt was centuries ahead of its time. Marriages were also considered to be a strictly civil contract, instead of a divinely religious contract. As such, there was a divorce law included in the legal code that would allow a legal pathway to marital separation. For the time, the inclusion of a divorce law was strikingly liberal.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, 478.

<sup>198</sup> Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1636–1792*, 173.

<sup>199</sup> Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1636–1792*, 181.

<sup>200</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 21.

However, what was most astonishing was not what the legal code included, but rather what it excluded. England and every other English colony included punishments for idolatry, hearsay, and blasphemy in their legal codes. This was done to suppress the expression of religious views that contradicted those prescribed by the government. Laws enforcing mandatory church attendance, as well as obliging citizens to financially support the local church were also typically included. No such law or instruction ever appeared in Rhode Island's constitution or legal structure. It was made clear that the government would have no legal ground to interfere in the spiritual lives of its citizens. This was further reinforced through the legal code's bold statement that "all men may walk as their conscience persuade them."<sup>201</sup>

As Rhode Island's Constitution enjoyed a broad consensus among Rhode Islanders, the colony began to thrive and really come to a place of stability. It was not perfect, as they still experienced the growing pains of a new colony and felt friction from Massachusetts. However, they had reached a place that many, even members of the colony, likely doubted that they would ever reach. Williams served as chief officer for three years before stepping down to become assistant governor. With the colony having achieved a sense of permanence, Williams could now turn more of his time and attention to his own trading post, which he was able to make a decent profit from.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1636–1792*, 190.

<sup>202</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, 486.

It seemed that Williams' dream of creating a separate and free society had finally come to pass. All of the tireless dedication and passion that he poured into the colony had paid off. He felt free to relax and enjoy the fruits of his labor. Unfortunately, though, this period of peace and stability would not last. A new issue would soon arise that would throw the fate of Rhode Island in the air and once again send Williams back to England to fight for his colony. The issue that arose dealt with William Coddington and William Arnold; two Rhode Islanders who had fought to have Massachusetts take over the colony before Williams left for England.

Coddington held a lot of personal animosity towards Samuel Gorton, who he felt wronged him years prior. Additionally, he was not happy with the general direction that the colony was heading, stating in a letter to Winthrop that he "abhorred [Rhode Island's] course."<sup>203</sup> He held a lot of money and influence in the small colony, so many feared what he might do. Rhode Island tried to appease him by offering him the highly distinguished position of president of the colony, but he jeered at the offer. Instead, he again turned to Massachusetts to see if they would absorb the Aquidneck Island towns of Newport and Portsmouth (where he resided). Arnold agreed to Coddington's sentiments and joined him in trying to convince Massachusetts to intervene.<sup>204</sup>

Arnold attempted to provoke Massachusetts by claiming that Rhode Island harbored "professed enemies against all the united colonies," and that some citizens "say

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<sup>203</sup> Edward Winslow, *Hypocrisie Unmasked, a true Relation of the Proceedings of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts against Samuel Gorton* (Providence: Club for Colonial Reprints, 1916), 82.

<sup>204</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, 469-470.

there be no other witches upon earth nor devils, but your own pastors and ministers.<sup>205</sup>

This charge of deliberate blasphemy angered magistrates, but not enough to take Arnold up on his offer to seize the colony. They felt that it would be too dangerous to make a move against Rhode Island, as they already had a patent. This did not discourage Arnold or Coddington from their pursuit of ruining Rhode Island, however.

Coddington decided that he would personally go to London and retrieve a new charter that would best the one that Williams received. It took two years and required much deceit, but in 1651, Coddington did receive a charter that placed the Aquidneck Island towns of Newport and Portsmouth under his personal jurisdiction and making him the governor for life of this island portion of Rhode Island.<sup>206</sup> The people of Aquidneck did not respond well to his intrusive governance, however. He had a short and chaotic run as “governor” that ended in him fleeing to Boston and disavowing any special rights that he once claimed to the island.<sup>207</sup>

The issue was that Coddington placed a legal crack right in the charter that Williams obtained in 1644. A crack that would not be easily closed. The lingering doubts in the validity of Williams’ charter that accompanied Coddington being able to procure a charter for the same land undercut Rhode Islanders’ confidence and opened the colony up to scrutiny and challenges by other colonies. Massachusetts was quick to exploit this new

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<sup>205</sup> Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1636–1792*, 235.

<sup>206</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 21.

<sup>207</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, 489.

weakness, claiming that Plymouth now had the right to claim Warwick. Connecticut too laid claim to a large trek of land in Narragansett Bay. Rhode Island leaders knew that they did not have the power to hold off these advances. They were a small colony with limited resources and a charter that adversaries were poking legal holes in. The only way to keep Rhode Island intact was to bolster their claim through a new and stronger English charter.

Rhode Islander initially asked Williams to travel back to England as soon as Coddington left. Stating that they would “pay the hundred pound dew him,” which was the money he was meant to be paid for his earlier trip, “and a hundred pound more.”<sup>208</sup> Williams initially refused. Perhaps he did not think that Coddington would succeed or he was weary of personally sacrificing valuable years out of his own private life for the colony. Whatever the reason that caused him to initially refuse, the circumstance had become more desperate. He understood that if he did not make the trip that Rhode Island would surely perish. There would be no other place in the colonies or the world for liberty loving people to go.

In a matter of months, a new group of delegates were selected to travel to England and advocate for Rhode Island’s preservation. Providence and Warwick selected Williams as their representative, and Portsmouth and Newport selected John Clarke, a physician and Baptist minister in Newport, and the colony’s attorney general, William Dyer, as their representatives. They would have a daunting journey and task ahead of them, but all of the men understood that failure would mean an end to the liberty driven

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<sup>208</sup> Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1636–1792*, 231.

Rhode Island, which would be a tremendous loss to them, the people of Rhode Island, and humanity.<sup>209</sup>

While the representatives trekked across the Atlantic, the people of Rhode Island made the remarkable decision to outlaw slavery. On May 23, 1652, a law preventing the malicious practice of permanent servitude was passed:

“Whereas, there is a common course practised amongst English men to buy negers, to that end that they may have them for service or slaves forever; for the preventinge of such practices among us, let it be ordered, that no blacke mankind or white being forced by covenant bond, or otherwise, to serve...longer than ten yeares.... And at the end of ten yeares to sett them free, as the manner is with the English servants.”<sup>210</sup>

Though the law would come to be ignored in the following century, it was the first law of its kind to be passed and illustrates how committed they were at the time to making Rhode Island the freest place on Earth.

Williams, Clarke, and Dyer arrived in England during a time of unrest and confusion. The Civil War was over, and Oliver Cromwell and the Parliamentarians that he led had ultimately triumphed. King Charles had been beheaded three years prior, leaving England in a new tumultuous period. Though the war was over, many were still recovering from its devastation and adjusting to the new order. Despite all the political

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<sup>209</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, 492.

<sup>210</sup> Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1636–1792*, 243.

chaos, Williams wasted no time getting to work on his mission. Within three months of being there, and with the help of his old friend Sir Henry Vain, he had successfully gotten Coddington's charter revoked and secured a reaffirmation that Williams' original charter still held. However, the council only gave Rhode Island jurisdiction over the disputer territory "for the present and until further direction." It was far from a cemented decision.

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It was still a step in the right direction that would hopefully stall other colonies from moving in on Rhode Island. Dyer departed immediately with the happy news, while Williams and Clarke stayed behind to fight for a more permanent resolution. Williams worked any and every connection that he had, which primarily included Vain. He stayed as a guest at his house and was provided access to Cromwell through him. In a letter to Anne Sadler he wrote that "I confess that I have many adversaries, but also many friends and divers eminent. It hath pleased the Generall [Cromwell] himself to send for me and to entertaine many discourses with me."<sup>212</sup> Despite his constant networking and making petitions to the right people, progress seemed to slow, which weighed heavily on the exhausted Williams.

In a letter that he wrote to his friend Gregory Dexter, after nine months of being in England, he explained just how tired he was of the circumstances that kept him in England and how he had little hope that he would return home soon: "[B]y my publike Letters you will see how We Wrastle and how we are like Yet to Wrastle, in the hopes of an End. For my selfe I had hopes to have got away by this ship but I see now the mind of

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<sup>211</sup> Roger Williams, *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*, 370.

<sup>212</sup> Roger Williams, *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*, 358.

the Lord to hould me here. The Determinacion of...the Controversie...Sir, I feare will be a worck of Time, I feare longer than we have Yet bene here.”<sup>213</sup> Williams had diligently dedicated years of his life to the fulfillment of his imagined safe haven and to the service of Rhode Island, only to be met with trial after trial. He was worn out and ready for a final resolution.

A breakthrough finally came in March 1653 when the Council of State submitted a report to Parliament that favored Williams and his Rhode Island colony. Williams’ optimism that this positive step would lead to an end in his time in London was quickly squelched, however. The already precarious political situation of England took a nosedive as its two most prominent leaders, Vane and Cromwell, began feuding amongst themselves. This conflict further divided Parliament and diverted its attention away from matters in Rhode Island.<sup>214</sup>

Despite this obvious delay in progress, Williams wrote a letter to those in Rhode Island in which he conveyed his optimism that they would still accomplish their end goal. He stated that he and his adversaries “stand as two armies ready to engage, observing the motions and postures each of other, and yet shy of each other,” and that Vane “would do as the eye of God leads him” and that he had “faithfully promised me that he would

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<sup>213</sup> Roger Williams, *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*, 347.

<sup>214</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, 489-499.



observe the motion of our New-England business.”<sup>215</sup> He also reminded them that they already had the victory of Parliament reaffirming the 1644 charter.

Williams continued his letter by expressing his great desire to return home and to be released from the burdensome obligation that he felt to Rhode Island: “Remember I am a father and an husband; I have longed earnestly to return with the last ship, and yet I have not been willing to withdraw my shoulders from the burthen lest it pinch others and fall heavy upon all.”<sup>216</sup> Williams understood the reality that he was their best chance at success, and that if he were to abandon the situation that others would severely struggle to achieve permanence for Rhode Island. This was a responsibility that he did not intend to abort, but one that was overwhelming and full of personal sacrifices. He continued, explaining that there were “many weights hanging on” him. Weights such as his family and his own estate in Rhode Island, which would cause him to have reason to “make haste” out of England. “Yet, I would not lose their [his family] estates, peace and liberty, by leaving hastily.”<sup>217</sup>

Williams fully recognized that if he did not stay and advocate for Rhode Island and the principles that it embodied, that there would not be much of a home or haven to return to. As such, though he painfully missed his family and felt unduly overwhelmed by the task that lay before him, his motivations to stay ultimately outweighed his longing to return home. He concluded his letter by encouraging his friends and followers to do their part to secure the colony’s future by not allowing any “private respects or gain or

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<sup>215</sup> Roger Williams, *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*, 386.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

quarrels” to cause them “to neglect the public and common safety, peace and liberties” of Rhode Island. His closing line was “P.S. my love to my Indian friends.”<sup>218</sup>

Williams remained on good terms with both Cromwell and Vane, though their own feud continued to escalate. He was confident that Cromwell would confirm the charter and that Vane would not interfere. Yet, other priorities took precedent and Rhode Island continually got put to the side. Almost a year passed with no headway being made. Williams continued to grow increasingly homesick and was quickly running out of money as well. He sold nearly everything he owned in order to prolong his trip, only retaining his home and plot of land. Additionally, he began to receive word that Rhode Island was falling into disarray in his absence. All things considered, he decided that it was at last time to return home. He had set the wheels in motion in England, and felt confident that Clarke could stay behind and obtain a permanent charter at a more opportune time.<sup>219</sup>

Williams left London and was waiting to board his ship to America when he was greeted with good news via messenger. The council had decided that for the time being at least they would side with Williams. They sent him three documents to take back to America; An official reaffirmation of the original charter, a warning to the adversarial New England colonies that they must allow him safe passage through their territories, and a statement of policy that affirmed that Williams’ liberty of conscience should be maintained in Rhode Island. This was a satisfying development that made departing for home all the sweeter. A few months after this action, Cromwell himself wrote to

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Johnson, *The First American Founder: Roger Williams and Freedom of Conscience*, 214-215.

Williams apologizing for the delay and reaffirming that they should “proceede in your Governmt accordinge to the Tenor of your Charter formerly granted.”<sup>220</sup>

Williams returned to a chaotic situation in Rhode Island. The colony had splintered over the notion of stirring up conflict with the Dutch by engaging in maritime privateering. Those on the mainland detested this idea, while those on Aquidneck thought that it could yield a decent profit. Williams desperately tried to negotiate some peace between the factions. He wrote a public memorandum urging citizens to put aside the petty quarrels and remember how much they had accomplished and how blessed they were: “Such peace, such security, such liberties for the Soule and Body as were never enjoyed by any English men, nor any in the world...that grand cause of TRUTH and FREEDOME OF CONSCIENCE, hath been upheld to this day.”<sup>221</sup>

Williams’ plea seemed to work as representatives of Aquidneck and the mainland met and agreed to again unite under the original charter. After this demonstration of mediation, the colony asked him to once again serve in public office. This was an offer that he had been sent while in England but had refused. However, given the existing state of affairs, he decided to accept the office of president. It did not happen overnight, but with Williams at the helm, peace and order was restored to Rhode Island once again.

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<sup>220</sup> Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1636–1792*, 317.

<sup>221</sup> Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1636–1792*, 351.

Even Gorton and Coddington, who were long established enemies, were able to put aside their differences and come together.<sup>222</sup>

The Restoration brought King Charles II to the throne in 1660, which effectively ended the long-held rule of Cromwell and Parliament. This development brought yet another round of insecurity to Rhode Island. Charters were traditionally granted by the English monarch, but Williams' 1644 charter had been awarded by Parliament during the Civil War. Charles II had no legal obligation to recognize the charter given out by his previous enemies during the war. If they were no longer recognized as a legal colony by the English government, the neighboring colonies would seize the opportunity and claim the land that they had been lusting after for years.

Thankfully though, John Clarke was still in England and still the agent for Rhode Island. Despite the years of separation, he still had the best interests of Rhode Island at heart and moved quickly to remedy the precarious situation. Aside from the reassurance that Williams took back to Rhode Island in 1652, Clarke had not been able to obtain any further guarantees or augment the legal status. The colony had been resting on those documents and reaffirmations, but that was no longer an option. It was now imperative that Clarke receive a new charter, not from Parliament, but from the king himself.

Fortunately for their cause, Charles II held a degree of sympathy towards religious dissenters and notions of toleration. After three years of legal juggling and dealing with the appearance of John Winthrop Jr., who came to England to represent Connecticut's interests against Rhode Island, Clarke did finally receive the much-

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<sup>222</sup> Edwin S. Gaustad, *Roger Williams: Prophet of Liberty*, 78.

anticipated charter from Charles II. In doing so, the king went against his own Anglican populated Parliament and many advisers who detested ideas of toleration and warned him against opening this door.<sup>223</sup>

The content of the charter was completely astonishing and unique to any charter that had ever been issued in European history. It clearly defined the principles of religious freedom and separation that Rhode Island entreated: “Whereas they have freely declared that it is much on their hearts to hold forth a *lively experiment*, that a most flourishing civil state may stand and be best maintained, and that among our English subjects, with a full liberty in religious concernment.”<sup>224</sup> It went on to state that “no person within the said colony, at any time hereafter, shall be any wise molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question, for any differences in opinion, in matters of religion.”<sup>225</sup> To be granted by the king permission to refute the teachings of the Church of England and not persecute people for ostracized religious beliefs was a huge accomplishment, one that most never thought possible.

Going one step further though, the charter also stated that “the form of government established is Democratical.”<sup>226</sup> Given that the king was a monarch who truly believed in the divine province of royalty, his open endorsement of a democratic society, even one that was coined an experiment, was nothing short of extraordinary.

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<sup>223</sup> Edwin S. Gaustad, *Roger Williams: Prophet of Liberty*, 79.

<sup>224</sup> “Rhode Island Royal Charter, 1663.” sos.ri.gov, n.d., accessed 2020  
<https://www.sos.ri.gov/assets/downloads/documents/RI-Charter-annotated.pdf>.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

Centralizing power was the crux of monarchical influence and authority. Democracy and severing ties to the church were both a direct threat to the overall status, reach, and power of the king.

Yet, Charles II consented to Rhode Island pursuing a spiritually free and democratic government. His own background and experiences with religious oppression was likely what caused him to openly support Rhode Island; He was raised Catholic by his mother, but forced to hide the pull he felt towards the faith due to Protestant sentiments. It was not until he was on his deathbed that he was able to convert to Catholicism. Therefore, he understood the pangs of religious oppression in a very personal and significant way. This intimate understanding likely made him more open to new ideas as to how to approach the relationship between religion and state. Whatever his *exact* reasoning or motivations, Charles II signed into legal existence the freest and most liberal society in the world.<sup>227</sup>

Though this charter was not the cure to all of Rhode Island's internal and external ailments, it was everything that Williams could have hoped for. It provided a greater sense of security and permanence, which in turn nurtured continual growth and stability. For the first time, officials were able to exert the authority entrusted in them by the one source that all Englishmen respected, the king. Despite the best efforts of Massachusetts and others who sought to thwart Williams' spiritual haven, Rhode Island received the king's blessing and was there to stay, with all its glorious freedom intact and on display.

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<sup>227</sup> Michael Anthony Lawrence, *Radicals in Their Own Time: Four Hundred Years of Struggle for Liberty and Equal Justice in America* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 60.

For the remaining twenty years of his life, Williams persisted as a champion of all forms of freedom; later becoming one of America's earliest abolitionists. Staying actively involved in Rhode Island politics and government, he held the offices of assistant deputy, councilor, commissioner, and clerk. He lived to see and enjoy the actualization of what he lovingly dubbed "soul liberite," which materialized as a flourishing society free from the tyranny and oppression of religious persecution.<sup>228</sup> He would pass away in Providence at the age of 80, surrounded and comforted by the fulfillment of his freedom filled vision.<sup>229</sup>

This was not only a great personal victory, but also a victory for all of humanity, as Williams' concept for religious tolerance and separation would not stagnate and remain within the borders of Rhode Island. It would immensely grow in popularity and expand miles beyond the small commonwealth. Not long after the 1663 charter, King Charles II began granting similar liberties and guarantees as those included in the Rhode Island charter to new colonies, such as Carolina and New Jersey. Pennsylvania was also later founded on core principles of spiritual freedom.<sup>230</sup> Their founding documents, which were published in 1682, ensured that nobody living "peace-ably and quietly under the civil government shall in any case be molested or prejudiced for his or her conscientious persuasion or practice."<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Roger Williams, *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*, 355.

<sup>229</sup> Lawrence, *Radicals in Their Own Time: Four Hundred Years of Struggle for Liberty and Equal*, 61.

<sup>230</sup> Lawrence, *Radicals in Their Own Time: Four Hundred Years of Struggle for Liberty and Equal*, 64.

<sup>231</sup> Frame of Government of Pennsylvania, May 5, 1682, transcript by Yale Law School, Lillian Godman Library

As time wore on, the notion of religious toleration continued to spread and envelope other people and colonies. The general opinion surrounding religion's role in society began to shift in favor of more freedom and toleration and less governmental oversight. Rhode Island served as a blistered example that there was no need to link the church and the state, a society could unite and thrive under civil terms. As the 18<sup>th</sup> century dawned and more and more people migrated to the American colonies, many fleeing desperate situations and oppressive governments from all over Europe, the ability to practice faith freely became paramount.

Historian William Sweet stated that the 18<sup>th</sup> century flood of immigration aided America's acceptance of Williams' notions of tolerance:

"The fact that American colonies became a refuge for people persecuted for conscience from all Western Europe resulted in bringing to these shores a great variety of religious minority groups, and this tended, more and more, to create a feeling of general toleration in colonial America."<sup>232</sup>

As the variety in ethnic, cultural, and spiritual backgrounds grew in America, it became almost necessary to embrace a certain level of tolerance, as there were just so many religious viewpoints and practices to contend with. Colonies also wanted to succeed in the New World, so they would offer relaxed religious laws or even freedom in order to attract new settlers.

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<sup>232</sup> Sweet, William Warren. "Natural Religion and Religious Liberty in America." *The Journal of Religion* 25, no. 1 (1945): 45-55. [www.jstor.org/stable/1197684](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1197684)



As religious tolerance increasingly became an accepted societal norm, successive generations grew accustomed to it and came to expect religious liberty and a degree of separation between church and state. The notion that once shocked and horrified people ultimately became mainstream and recognized as a standard that must be included moving into the future. As such, following the events of the Revolution, the United States of America came to fully embrace religious freedom as a core principle and liberty. It was proudly hailed as a precious facet of the American character and enshrined as the very first amendment to the Constitution.

In a letter written by George Washington in 1790 to the first Hebrew congregation of Rhode Island, Washington stated:

“It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens.”<sup>233</sup>

What started as radical ideas being spouted by a religious dissident in a pitiful colony built on gifted land would grow to envelop all thirteen colonies and eventually the Western World. Roger Williams was tenacious in his belief that everyone should have the freedom to seek God in their own way and bold in his pursuit of changing hearts and minds. He could have easily built a comfortable life for himself in Massachusetts. Being well liked, sought after, and connected to John Winthrop, he could have shared in the

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<sup>233</sup> Clausen, Christopher. "America's Design for Tolerance." *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-) 31, no. 1 (2007): 26-32. [www.jstor.org/stable/40262170](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40262170)

power and supremacy that was enjoyed by colony leaders. But instead, he followed his convictions. Sacrificing any possible security and enduring years of ridicule and hardship, he stood resolute in his beliefs and fully pursued his vision of a civil society free from religious persecution.

His legacy can be seen not just in the state of Rhode Island, but every Sunday when individuals go to their church or synagogue or temple or choose to stay home with no fear of government sanction. Anytime someone publicly purchases a Bible, Tanakh, or Quran without being fined. Whenever someone follows an obscure spiritual outlet without being beaten or imprisoned. The absolute autonomy of individuals to express their spirituality and live how their conscience dictates, without any government interference, is an enduring remnant of Williams' tireless dedication in seeing his lively experiment through.

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