

# ROGER WILLIAMS AND THE FOUNDING OF RHODE ISLAND

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The founding of Rhode Island, by Roger Williams, was based on three important ideals: religious tolerance and freedom, the separation of church and state, and political democracy. These values were held personally by Roger Williams and resulted in his banishment from the Puritan- controlled Massachusetts Bay Colony. These same principles were later adopted by the framers of the Constitution and fought over by the United States in the Revolutionary War.

Roger Williams (1603-1683) grew up in London, England and studied at Cambridge. His liberal viewpoints quickly got him into trouble with clergymen and political leaders in England. Originally ordained in the Church of England, Williams first tried to reform it. He later abandoned that idea and sought complete separation. According to Parrington in *The Colonial Mind*, he seemed to be a "Puritan intellectual who became a Christian freethinker, more concerned with social commonwealths than with theological dogmas."

After being persecuted because of his religious beliefs, he sailed to New England in 1631. He settled in the Massachusetts Bay Colony and became a minister in the New World. There, his parishioners did not share his "adamant" belief to separate from the Church of England. He then moved on to both Salem and Plymouth, where his ideas also proved too radical. In 1636, his views had pushed the Puritan authorities too far. For example, apart from religion, Williams also spoke out about the colonists' mistreatment of the Native Americans. He proclaimed that the white man had strayed from their original goal of converting Native Americans. Instead, he said, the white man was taking their land, goods, and even life.

In June of 1636, the Puritans had enough. They banished Williams from the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In this era, banishment was essentially a death sentence. One was not only banished from the colony, but also from foods, supplies, and protection from Native Americans. However, Williams quickly found refuge with the Wampanoag Indians. Massasoit, their chief, gave him a piece of land along the Seekonk River. There was a problem with this land, however. Plymouth Colony had control of the area and forced Williams and his followers across the river. Williams developed a unique relationship with the Native Americans of the area. Unlike most other white men, he treated them like human beings and respected their rights. This led him to purchase land from two Narragansett chiefs, Canonicus and Miantonomi. On

this land, he founded the settlement of Providence.

Other religious "fanatics" suffered a fate similar to Williams. After being banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, they too headed south and began towns in the vicinity of Providence. These included religious exiles John Clarke, William Coddington and Anne Hutchinson. Hutchinson believed in antinomianism, that only faith is needed for salvation. This belief was not welcome by the Puritans. In exile, she founded Portsmouth in 1638. Clarke and Coddington decided to go further south and founded Newport. Only a few years later, four settlements would unite to form the colony of Rhode Island.

In 1644, Williams was granted a charter from Parliament that gave the group of towns a legal right to existence. This gave them the protection needed from Massachusetts and Plymouth, neighboring colonies with less liberal views on religious tolerance.

In 1663, Rhode Islanders, represented by John Clarke, took advantage of the opportunity created by a change in the monarchy to attain a royal charter. The charter issued was extremely liberal; the colonists were given a large portion of self-government, including the right to elect their governor. This was rare for charters, since normally the king appointed governors and other officials. *Also* in the charter was the right to have complete religious freedom. The king therefore acknowledged this founding keystone by including it in the charter. The colony's charter managed to withstand King James II's Dominion for New England (1686- 1689) idea and King Phillip's War Rhode Island continued to serve as a religious haven. Many different faiths and sects including Anabaptists, Quakers, and Jews, settled in Rhode Island. America's first Baptist church (1639), Quaker meeting house (1657), Jewish congregation (1658), and Calvinist congregation (1686), were attracted to Rhode Island.

Rhode Island's formation was truly unique. Founded by exiles with radical religious beliefs, they managed to form a successful state that also upheld their original principles - principles on which the United States was founded.

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