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THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF ROGER WILLIAMS TO RELIGIOUS  
FREEDOM AND DEMOCRATIC IDEALS

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A Term Paper  
Presented to  
Mr. Wally Hebert  
Ouachita Baptist University

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In Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
of Special Studies H291

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by  
Vicki Hubbs  
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THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF ROGER WILLIAMS TO RELIGIOUS  
FREEDOM AND DEMOCRATIC IDEALS

Introduction

- I. Early Background in England
  - A. Family
  - B. Education
  - C. Personality
  
- II. Early Years In the New World
  - A. Reasons for fleeing England
  - B. Continued religious oppression
  - C. Ban from other colonies
  
- III. Establishment of the New Colony
  - A. Work in colonies
    - 1. Alliance with the Indians
    - 2. Freedom for settlers
  - B. Trips to England
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      - a. Political situation in England
      - b. Obtained charter
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Conclusion

Roger Williams is best known as "the founder of Rhode Island". Few people realize that he was also a soldier, statesman, farmer, and preacher. Perhaps he is not well remembered because he is so hard to label. To him we owe the provisions in our government today of religious freedom and separation of church and state.<sup>1</sup> Because of his new ideas and courage to express them, Roger Williams was considered a radical by many of the people of his day.

In or about the year of Queen Elizabeth's death Roger Williams was born in London. The year was thought to be 1603 but the exact date is not known because of a fire in the parish church of the Williams family.

James Williams, a member of the Merchant Taylors' Company was Roger's father. His mother came from a rising family of shopkeepers. In discussing his family, one must mention his Uncle and Godfather, Roger Pemberton who served a year in the post of High Sheriff of Hertfordshire.

The King James version of the Bible was first printed during the childhood of Roger Williams. He read it right after it was released. He was converted at this time.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Allan Seager, They Worked for a Better World (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1939), pp. 32, 33.

<sup>2</sup>John Dos Passos, The Ground We Stand On (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1941), p. 27.

Although Williams wasn't considered especially precocious as a child, he did have an unusual skill. He learned to take shorthand so well that he served as the stenographer for Chief Justice Coke in the Court of the Star Chamber.

After Coke retired from the bench he sent his stenographer to a new school called the Charterhouse. Entering in 1621, he studied for two years until he got a scholarship to Pembroke Hall at Cambridge.

When King Charles ascended to the throne in 1625 Williams was still at Pembroke Hall. His patron again was Coke who was Lord Steward of the College. He was studying Latin, Greek, and Hebrew in preparation for the ministry. At that time he felt a call to serve God and to help in the coming purification of the English Church.

As is to be expected, a man as accomplished as Williams ~~was~~ in so many fields would have a complex personality. That the center of his character was stubbornness is evident in the fact that he refused to retract ideas he believed in. He was persistent in the quest for the realization of his ideals. He was no hypocrite and no coward.<sup>3</sup>

He was a man of his time and a part of it. He was warm, outgoing, and friendly. Even though he was persistent, he was more inclined to agreement than disagreement.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Seager, op. cit., pp. 12-16.

<sup>4</sup>Edmund S. Morgan, Roger Williams: The Church and State (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1967), p. 5.

The cast of Williams' mind was theological rather than political or social.<sup>5</sup> In 1629 he became chaplain of the family of Sir William Masham at High Laver, Essex. In December of this year he married Mary Barnard who had been a maid in a neighboring household.

He had begun as a minister of the Anglican Church. Since he couldn't stand the ceremonies or policies of that State Church, he joined the Anglican Liberals who were also known as the Puritans.

Williams later became a separatist because he considered the Puritans to be slow and timid. He said, "I believe that there hardly hath ever been a conscientious Separatist, who was not first a Puritan..."<sup>6</sup> As a Separatist he became an enemy of both the Anglicans and the Puritans.

If he had chosen to stay in England, Williams would have had little chance for happiness. He had two choices: the first would be a comfortable hypocrisy and the second would be acceptance of the public scorn of the King and Bishops, possibly landing in the dirty and damp jail.<sup>7</sup> Williams, his wife, and eighteen other passengers of The Lyon landed at Nantasket on February 5, 1631. Roger Williams was not a man that would accept either alternative.

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<sup>5</sup>Perry Miller, Roger Williams (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1953), p. 27.

<sup>6</sup>Morgan, op. cit., p. 17. <sup>7</sup>Seager, op. cit., p. 60.

Although he was well received at Boston, Williams refused the pastorate of the Boston church. He felt that the colonists of Massachusetts weren't really separatists. They believed that the Church of England was corrupt but they didn't denounce it entirely. He took a smaller post at Salem where he drew large crowds.

John Winthrop and his group of unseparated Puritan Ministers worked hard to keep hold of the reins of the colonists from England who poured into the Bay. They tried to suppress the democrats and extreme protestants. They also condemned those of the court party who celebrated Christmas and sold guns and liquor to the Indians.

Williams became an object of scandal because he preached against the taking of Indian lands without compensation. He was willing to tolerate other religions but those who considered themselves the Elect-ordained by God to control New England-were much opposed to the radical ideas of Williams.<sup>8</sup>

The next fall he went to Plymouth where the Church was more Congregationalist and the government was more democratic.

The Bay Colony believed that all government should come from the wisdom of the Old Testament. They followed the patterns it set forth to the letter. Williams believed

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<sup>8</sup>Dos Passos, op. cit., p. 60.

that the authority of the states lay in civil matters only. He stated that the church should deal with souls and the government with goods and bodies. He voiced his ideas persistently.<sup>9</sup>

In the meetinghouse at New Town, Massachusetts near Cambridge Roger Williams stood trial in October, 1636. He was charged with spreading "dangerous opinions" among the Bay settlers. The bitter, prejudiced, and narrow minded chief members of the Massachusetts Bay Colony shouted charges.<sup>10</sup> He was sentenced to exile, but before he could be sent back to England Williams fled to his Indian friends, the Narragansett tribe. Williams had left England because he thought the Church of England was wrong. Basically, he left Massachusetts for the same reason.<sup>11</sup>

After his exile Williams was looking for refuge in a place where he could speak what he felt. After being asked by the Governor of Plymouth to move on, he finally found the place for his new beginning. He was warmly received by the Indians at the mouth of the Mohassuck River on Narragansett Bay. Williams christened the area Providence after dining there with the Indians.

In his words Williams' community would be "a corner as a shelter for the poor and persecuted."<sup>12</sup> For the first

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<sup>9</sup>Seager, op. cit., p. 15. <sup>10</sup>ibid., p. 12.

<sup>11</sup>Morgan, op. cit., p. 28. <sup>12</sup>Seager, op. cit., p. 20.



time in the world a place - Providence - grew out of three principles: democratic government, complete religious freedom, and racial tolerance.<sup>13</sup> He insured the separation of Church and State. Obedience was only required in civil matters.

Entry into Providence was free. A democracy was set up as the simple government. The masters of families could vote with the majority passing laws and ordinances. The head of each household that was admitted as a freeman was given a ten acre houselot and a sixacre woodlot in the back of town.

Always a friend to the Indians, Williams found time to learn their languages. He could be considered the first Indian Missionary in New England but always with the thought in mind that they had a right to their gods and totems. He had respect for the dignity of the Indians as men. He considered them equal which was an uncommon thought in his day. He said, "Nature knows no difference between European and American in blood, birth, bodies, etc. God having of one blood made all mankind."<sup>14</sup>

He further justified his thoughts in the following quote:

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>14</sup>Irwin H. Polishook, Roger Williams, John Cotton and Religious Freedom (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), p. 8.

Boast not proud English of thy birth and blood,  
 Thy brother Indian is by birth as good.  
 Of one blood God made  
 Him, and thee and all,  
 As wise, as fair, as strong, as personal.<sup>15</sup>

The new colony of Providence had no official church.  
 All faiths and religions were welcomed.

In 1639 the first Baptist Church in America was established in Providence. Williams was baptized by the Baptist Preacher but he was too restless to limit himself in one sect for any length of time. His informal seeking of true religion developed into a fervent mysticism labeled in New England two centuries later as transcendentalism.<sup>16</sup>

The Jews from New Amsterdam established Jeshuat Israel in Providence in 1658. Although Williams disapproved of their ideas refugee Quakers came to Providence in 1656.

The Rhode Island settlement had been started without a charter. England was involved in a civil war of religious and political conflict in the years 1640 through 1660. The tiny outlaw colony, a nation without ties or allegiances, was threatened by the turmoil across the ocean.

A New England confederation was formed and again Rhode Island was endangered by the threat of being absorbed by the Bay Government. The inhabitants of Rhode Island were basically English who wanted an English charter that would insure their right of self government.

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid. <sup>16</sup>Dos Passos, op. cit., p. 74.

After fourteen years Williams returned to England on behalf of Rhode Island to obtain legal sanction for the Narragansett Colony. His journey would hopefully insure safety for the colony from enemies on both sides of the Atlantic.

It was late summer, 1642, when he arrived in London. Puritanism had won out. The King was defeated by the leadership of Parliament in a bloody war. In 1642 Parliament ordered the dissolution of Episcopal bishops and archbishops. Parliament's goal was the elimination of Anglicanism and the rebuilding of the Church of England under the control of Parliament.

Since he thought his ideas might be suitable for the old world as well as for his new colony, he made them known when he arrived in England. He was an advocate of the separation of church and state. He questioned the intervention of civil government into church affairs. He believed that all men should have religious freedom.<sup>17</sup>

There were two agents in London working to get the Narragansett section granted to Massachusetts. By the time Williams arrived they had a document drafted and approved by some members of the Committee for the Colonies. Williams had on his side Sir Harry Vane who was a powerful negotiator to Parliament and a member of the Committee of the Two

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<sup>17</sup>Polishook, op. cit., p. 106.

Kingdoms. By March Parliament finally approved a charter that gave Providence full rights of self-government.

Williams had obtained "A Free and Absolute Charter of Incorporation of Providence Plantations on the Narragansett Bay in New England."<sup>18</sup> Under the charter and its acceptance the four towns of Providence, Warwick, Newport, and Portsmouth were joined formally into a chartered colony under the government of a General Court which was later known as the General Assembly.

From 1654 through 1657 Williams served as "President" of the colony - a post that was comparable to that of governor. Under his guidance the four towns were firmly united but Williams had little control because of disorganization. In the new settlements under this arrangement jails were built, taxes levied and law officers were appointed or elected.

In 1651 Williams returned again to England. He stayed until Oliver Cromwell was named Lord Protector to see that the change in government didn't affect the standings of the Narragansett country. He doubted Cromwell's dictatorship but favored the toleration exhibited by the Lord Protector. He arrived home in 1654 with the confirmed charter.

Oliver Cromwell died in 1658. He had made England mighty in Europe but failed in two of his major goals.

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<sup>18</sup>Dos Passos, op. cit., p. 106.

First, he failed in the building of a league of Protestant nations on the continent and second, he failed to establish the setting up of a reformed and stable representative system at home.

After the restoration of the Royal Regime the Rhode Island and Providence charter was confirmed. Williams was appointed as one of the assistants in charge of the new government.

Roger Williams lived to be an old man. He served in many public offices in his growing colony and always remained a friend to the Indians.

His success is well described in the following quote by Edmund Sears Morgan:

It does not follow that we should give Williams back to the nineteenth and twentieth century liberals who have claimed him for their own. Williams belonged to the seventeenth century, to Puritanism, and to Separatism. What he did share with a number of men, in his own century as well as before and since, was a quality that always seems to lift a man above his time; intellectual courage, the willingness to go where the mind leads. When his mind told him there could be no church, he left the church, even though he wanted nothing more than to serve it. When his mind told him the state could do nothing but harm to religion, he said so, even though it cost him everything he had. We may praise him (and so ourselves) for his defense of religious liberty and the separation of church and state. He deserves the tribute (and so perhaps do we?) But it falls short of the man. His greatness was simpler: He dared to think.<sup>19</sup>

The times weren't favorable for Roger Williams. His was a hard life. He always traveled in flight or business.

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<sup>19</sup> Morgan, op. cit., p. 62.

He didn't want power. He was a Christian who believed with great fervor in Jesus. This fact made him a radical in his time.<sup>20</sup>

One of the outstanding characteristics of the Constitution of the United States has been the separation of Church and State. The first amendment states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."<sup>21</sup> Roger Williams was the first man to promote these ideas of a civil democratic state.

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<sup>20</sup>Seager, op. cit., pp. 32, 33.   <sup>21</sup>Morgan, op. cit., p. 62.

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