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## "Glory To The English And Protestant Name": Protestant Hegemony In Seventeenth And Eighteenth-Century Rhode Island

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“Glory to the English and Protestant Name”: Protestant Hegemony in Seventeenth and  
Eighteenth-Century Rhode Island

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A Dissertation presented to the Graduate Faculty of The College of William & Mary  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Harrison Ruffin Tyler Department of History

College of William & Mary  
May 2023



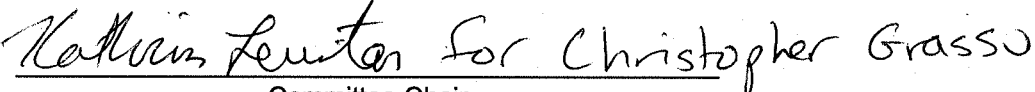
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This Dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

  
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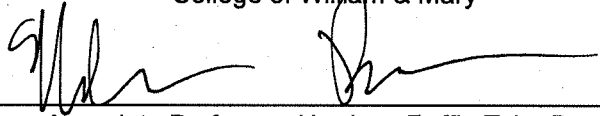
  
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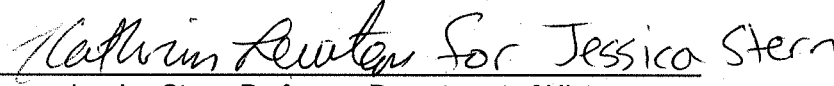
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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that Protestant hegemony prevailed in colonial Rhode Island in the absence of an established church, which demonstrates that church establishment was not the primary fuel of Protestant hegemony in the early modern English Atlantic world. Analyzing a combination of well-known and lesser-known books, letters, diaries, newspapers, and laws, my findings indicate that Rhode Island championed a broad Protestant synthesis that transcended individual denominations. While historians have identified this Protestant synthesis in the era of the early republic in the United States, my research shows that these forces of synthesis and hegemony without establishment existed at least two centuries earlier in the English Atlantic world.

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“Anyone who sets out to study colonial Rhode Island feels a number of special pains and pleasures... The situation has to be treated as an intellectual challenge if it is not to induce despair.” –Sydney James, *Colonial Rhode Island: A History*, p. xvi.

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## Introduction

The winter of early 1769 was a tense season for Newport. The year before, the opposing political factions of the Ward and Hopkins families, and their respective allies, agreed not to compete with one another on certain offices.<sup>1</sup> That agreement, however, only channeled more energy into control of offices that were not part of the negotiation. The Hopkins faction campaigned heavily to elect Walter Chaloner, Esq. to the position of sheriff of Newport. Chaloner would later become instrumental in a loyalist spy ring and then relocate to New Brunswick as a Justice of the Peace.<sup>2</sup> The clerk of the General Assembly, William Ellery, was not pleased. Ellery, a merchant, later became a member of the Sons of Liberty and a signer of the Declaration of Independence after replacing former Rhode Island governor Samuel Ward as a delegate.<sup>3</sup> Ellery wrote to Ward in February, calling Chaloner a “Red Hot Tory” and an “enemy to Civil and Religious Liberty.” That those liberties were held in high esteem in late eighteenth-century Rhode Island—or by any late eighteenth-century American with Ellery’s politics—is not unexpected. Another of Ellery’s accusations, however, gives one pause. Ellery accused Chaloner of being “as great a Bigot to the Established Church as ever existed.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon Wood calls this political rivalry, couched in Rhode Island’s idiosyncratic ballot voting, “a modern two-party system” in *Power and Liberty: Constitutionalism and the American Revolution* (Oxford, 2021), p. 178. This rivalry and voting in eighteenth-century Rhode Island is covered in greater detail in chapter 5 of this dissertation.

<sup>2</sup> “Monumental Inscriptions at St. John, New Brunswick, in the Old Cemetery at the Head of King’s Street,” *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, Vol. 19, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Chaloner and Ellery were related by marriage. Chaloner married Ann Almy. Elizabeth Almy, Ann’s niece by her brother Job, was Ellery’s mother. For more on Ellery, see William M. Fowler, Jr., *William Ellery: A Rhode Island Politico and Lord of Admiralty* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> This letter cited in David S. Lovejoy, *Rhode Island Politics and the American Revolution, 1760-1776* (Brown, 1958), p. 141. The events surrounding this letter are covered pp. 140-142. The letter is also cited in Fowler, Jr., pp. 13-14.

What Chaloner said or did to earn himself the label is not clear. Chaloner appears to have been an Anglican, and we know for certain that Ellery was a Congregationalist. His father, William Ellery, Sr., “contributed generously” to the Newport Congregational Church, of which they were members. William, Sr. may have been an Old Light, having purchased Charles Chauncey’s *Seasonable Thoughts* criticizing the Great Awakening. William, Jr. did not “confine himself strictly to theology” and found common interest with the mostly Baptist Ward faction, especially in bristling at English attempts to control mercantile activity in the colonies.<sup>5</sup> He lobbied with Ward to have Rhode Island College, a Baptist institution, established in Newport. After Providence won out, Ellery was involved in a plan to charter a new college in Newport that guaranteed “equal Liberty to Congregationalists, Baptists, Episcopalians, [and] Quakers,” which collapsed when he failed to get support from the General Assembly.<sup>6</sup>

Ellery assured Ward that the accusations he made against Chaloner in his letter would convince their political allies. That Ellery felt that accusing Chaloner of being an enemy to the “established church” would secure votes begs the question: which established church? Rhode Island, as is well understood in early American historiography, had no established church. Anglicanism thrived in Rhode Island in the eighteenth century as it did in the region more generally, and other Rhode Islanders around this time sometimes referred to the Anglican Church as the “established church.” Although the Ward faction was mostly Congregational and Baptist and the Hopkins faction was mostly Quaker and Anglican, it is possible that Ellery, in promoting that accusation to Ward as one that would resonate with allies, intended to catch the few

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<sup>5</sup> Fowler, Jr., p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Fowler, Jr., p. 11.

Anglicans of their own faction who might have been tempted to support Chaloner instead—maybe even pick up a few Hopkins men.

Yet even taking as a given that he meant the Anglican church, the decision to write “the Established Church” deserves further scrutiny. He could have written “the Church of England,” or “the Established Church of England,” but he did not. Leaving off that specification does not necessarily indicate that Ellery was under the impression that the Church of England was, *ipso facto* by virtue of its colonial status, Rhode Island’s established church.<sup>7</sup> When writing from one Englishman to another, adding “of England” was probably unnecessary. But the implied Anglo-identity of not needing to specify “of England,” and that identity indirectly including its established church, invites exploration of some longstanding assumptions of the role of religion in colonial Rhode Island. Eighteenth-century English colonists in Rhode Island demonstrated that they understood their colony’s heritage of liberty of conscience as unique and worthy of pride, but they also demonstrated a weariness with and cynicism toward lofty ideals of the seventeenth century and clichéd rhetoric about religious liberty. Thumbing through the pages of the newspapers of the time, one can easily imagine that protesting that Rhode Island did not have an established church in 1760s Newport might even earn you an eyeroll.

Jonathan Beecher Field observed that the mythical image of colonial Rhode Island as a utopia of radical religious liberty, singularly delivered by Roger Williams, has

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<sup>7</sup> Legal scholars argue that the establishment of the Church of England does not, by default, extend beyond England, regardless of a polity’s relationship to England or the Crown. While this legal argument is generally presented in the context of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, particularly in the cases of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Commonwealth nations, this basic legal principle can be productively applied to the early modern period, insofar as historians should not assume Anglican establishment in the absence of explicit establishment by the colony itself. See Norman Doe, “The Notion of a National Church: A Juridical Framework,” *Law & Justice—The Christian Law Review* 149 (2002): 77-91; C. R. Munro, “Does Scotland Have an Established Church,” *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 4, 20 (January 1997): 639-645; M. H. Ogilvie, “What is a Church by Law Established,” *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 28, 1 (Spring 1990): 179-236.

“passed out of serious scholarship.”<sup>8</sup> Yet scholarly criticisms of that idealized construction tend to do little more than chip pieces off it, rather than replace it completely. Instead of offering substantive reconstruction of the narrative of Rhode Island’s relationship to religion, scholars often simply point out incidental exceptions to Rhode Island’s religious freedom, the two most commonly cited being disenfranchisement of Catholics and restrictions of Jewish civil rights such as voting and holding office. Certainly, this dissertation offers plenty of accounting for those kinds of incidentals, and admittedly with the intention that they are surprising against the previously prevailing myths of Rhode Island exceptionalism. But colonial Rhode Island’s complex relationship to religion deserves a more wholesale reevaluation, not just a laundry list of “gotchas.”

I argue that colonial Rhode Island history demonstrates that Protestant hegemony in the early modern English Atlantic did not need the support of an established church, and that such establishment was not its primary source of fuel. Through law, politics, economics, and culture, colonial Rhode Island championed a broad Protestant synthesis that thrived without formal, explicit, and consistent establishment of one specific denomination. Rhode Island was ahead of its time, but not in the way historians typically think. Protestant hegemony in English colonial Rhode Island demonstrates the adoption of conceptions of broadly Protestant government and culture in the absence of an established church, which historians typically claim did not take place in most of what became the United States until the early republic.

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Beecher Field, *Errands into the Metropolis: New England Dissidents in Revolutionary London* (Hanover, NH: University of New England, 2009), p. 16.

This argument necessitates explanations of cultural hegemony, Protestant hegemony more specifically, and how historians utilize both frameworks. Thomas Clayton offers this concise sociological definition of cultural hegemony: “Hegemony refers to the process by which certain ideas are made prominent in society and, as a result of their manufactured status, come to inform our understanding of what constitutes just, proper, and legitimate ways of thinking and acting.”<sup>9</sup> Cultural hegemony as a concept in modern scholarship stems primarily from the work of Antonio Gramsci, who characterized it as:

The “spontaneous” consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is “historically” caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.<sup>10</sup>

Although Gramsci, coming from a Marxist perspective, emphasizes the role of economics, T. J. Jackson Lears contends that his work has relevance beyond “self-consciously Marxist scholars. Actually, Gramsci can inspire fresh thought in historians from a variety of intellectual traditions.” Lears calls on intellectual historians to use Gramsci to “understand how ideas reinforce or undermine existing social structures” and social historians to use his work “to reconcile the apparent contradiction between the power wielded by dominant groups and the relative cultural autonomy of subordinate

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Clayton, ed., “Introduction,” *Rethinking Hegemony* (South Melbourne, Australia: James Nicholas Publishers, 2006), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York, 1971), p. 12, cited in T. J. Jackson Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities,” *The American Historical Review* 90, No. 3 (1985): 568.

groups whom they victimize.”<sup>11</sup> Because cultural hegemony provides an inertia to how individuals at all levels of society think, speak (or write), and behave that is often unspoken and “spontaneous,” it can flourish even without being codified, and, therefore, even while the dominant group can plausibly deny that such hegemony is taking place, which I argue that Protestant hegemony managed to accomplish in early Rhode Island. But what is more, broad Protestantism, though not a specific denomination, *was* codified in Rhode Island law in addition to its culturally hegemonic force.

Few historians have consciously and intentionally engaged Protestant hegemony as a concept, and even fewer early American historians. Sociologist J. D. Davidson uses the term “Protestant hegemony,” or even “WASP hegemony” more specifically, to describe the continued overwhelming representation of white Protestants among the United States elite in business and politics, disproportionate to their numbers in the general population.<sup>12</sup> However, the privilege afforded individual Protestants is a distinct concept from the persistence of the influence of Protestantism in institutions themselves, regardless of the affiliations of the individuals within those institutions. Historian David A. Hollinger’s work highlights this distinction; he is one of the only Americanist historians to employ the term. Covering American Protestant missionaries abroad during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Hollinger argues that many of these missionaries returned home to challenge “Protestant cultural hegemony,” which he defines in terms of Protestant norms, language, and symbols in American institutions,

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<sup>11</sup> Lears, p. 568.

<sup>12</sup> JD Davidson et al, “Persistence and Change in the Protestant Establishment, 1930-1992,” *Social Forces* 74, no. 1 (1995): 157-175; JD Davidson, “Religion among America’s elite: Persistence and change in the Protestant establishment,” *Sociology of Religion* 55, No. 4 (Winter 1994): 419-440. Ralph E. Pyle, one of the co-authors of the first cited work, published this research as a book—see Pyle, *Persistence and Change in the Protestant Establishment* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996).

which is closer to how Gramsci encourages scholars to use the concept of hegemony and closer to how Lears encourages historians to use it.<sup>13</sup>

Hollinger's work dovetails with the work of Mark Noll, Steven Green, and David Sehat. Even though Noll, Green, and Sehat do not use the word "hegemony," all three historians of religion portray Protestantism in the United States as foundational to the nation's institutions, laws, and norms, even without a federally established church. Green's work argues for three distinct religious disestablishments in United States history.<sup>14</sup> The First Amendment represents the first disestablishment. The second disestablishment took place over the course of the early nineteenth century, as the First Amendment only prohibited *federal* established religion and many states initially retained their establishments. The third disestablishment, which Green dates from 1940 to 1975, "was the nation's cultural disestablishment involving the displacement of Protestantism and the struggle between secularism and pluralism."<sup>15</sup> Though not addressing Green directly, constitutional law scholar Michael W. McConnell takes issue with the idea of a first disestablishment, as "the First Amendment did not disestablish anything," instead preventing federal establishment in the first place while preserving state establishments.<sup>16</sup> If we accept McConnell's correction but otherwise adopt Green's framing, Providence

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<sup>13</sup> David A. Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America* (Princeton, 2017). Protestant hegemony is also employed as a concept in relation to missionary work in Kim Yunseong, "Protestant Missions as Cultural Imperialism in Early Modern Korea," *Korea Journal* 39, No. 4 (1999): 205-234. This indicates that the concept seems to have traction in scholarship on Protestant missionary activity more broadly. JM Yaremko similarly argues for "US Hegemony" in Protestant missions in early twentieth-century Cuba. See Yaremko, "'The Path of Progress': Protestant Missions, Education, and US Hegemony in the 'New Cuba,' 1898-1940," in N. W. Sobe (ed.), *American Post-Conflict Educational Reform* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 53-74.

<sup>14</sup> See Steven K. Green, *The Second Disestablishment: Church and State in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford, 2010); Green, *The Third Disestablishment: Church, State, & American Culture, 1940-1975* (Oxford, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> Green, *The Third Disestablishment*, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Michael W. McConnell, "Establishment and Disestablishment at the Founding, Part I: Establishment of Religion," *William and Mary Law Review* 44, no. 5 (April 2003): 2109.

Plantations did not disestablish anything in creating a “civil” government from scratch, but Rhode Island did experience something akin to Green’s second disestablishment when the settlement on Aquidneck Island—the original “Rhode Island,” formed separately from Providence Plantations—abandoned their attempts at an explicitly theocratic government and followed Providence’s lead in adopting a civil government. Yet none of the separate pieces that combined into the colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, nor the unified colony, attempted a third, cultural, disestablishment.

Nor would it be realistic to expect that they could, given how agonizing the third disestablishment was for the United States even three hundred years later, if indeed it can even be said to be complete at the time of this writing. David Sehat argues:

Protestant Christian influence in U.S. history was long-standing, widespread, and, from the perspective of dissenters, coercive. Religious views pervaded law at all levels. Reformers of all kinds, including abolitionists, women’s rights activists, labor organizers, and education reformers often had to contend with Christian—or, more narrowly, Protestant Christian—moral norms that defined and limited their rights.<sup>17</sup>

Yet as powerful as this set of Protestant norms was, Sehat also argues that “it was never as singular” as reformers portrayed it. “It often relied upon symbolic stands to obscure the subtler mechanisms by which it maintained control... the shadowy character of the moral establishment was its power.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> David Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* (Oxford, 2011), p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.



Does it tell us anything meaningful about colonial Rhode Island to state that it was no more progressive than the United States in the twentieth century? Noll's scholarship shows us that the United States Protestant moral order, as it existed after Green's first and second disestablishments, was more than just clinging remnants of former state and colonial establishments. Instead, it was something new entirely. Noll points to what he calls the "American Synthesis." In the early nineteenth century, this synthesis formed from "a compound of evangelical Protestant religion" that transcended denominational boundaries and championed "republican ideology, and commonsense moral reasoning."<sup>19</sup> The consequence of this was a "decline in the very notion of a church and a transfer of religious commitment from the church to the nation."<sup>20</sup> Noll traces the earliest origins of this synthesis to the first Great Awakening of the eighteenth century, but colonial Rhode Island's lack of establishment yet robust Protestant moral order, means that this synthesis dates to at least the seventeenth century. This is not to say that Rhode Island was the true origin of a distinctly American religious culture, swapping one exceptionalist myth for another. Instead, this is to say that the forces that created Noll's Protestant synthesis were live in the seventeenth-century English Atlantic world and in early English colonial America.

Understanding Rhode Island's role in this seventeenth-century synthesis absent of an established church necessitates an articulation of what scholars mean by "established church," and what exactly historians mean when they say that Rhode Island did not have one. Although seldom stated explicitly, the implied reasoning in most works of Rhode Island history is that Rhode Island did not have an established church because there was

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<sup>19</sup> Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford, 2002), p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

no specific denomination that the colonial government supported with taxes. This deserves further scrutiny because not all churches widely considered to be established have collected taxes, some churches in Rhode Island received significant support just short of taxes, and some places in the early modern English Atlantic—including, by the eighteenth century, Massachusetts—had pluralistic religious establishments that encompassed more than one denomination. Although I do not argue that colonial Rhode Island, in fact, had a church establishment, deconstructing and examining various definitions of church establishment provides an opportunity to reconsider the implications we assign to Rhode Island's lack of it.

Because defining an established church is a task that historians rarely take on consciously, I look to legal scholars for some theoretical grounding. In the twenty-first century, defining an established church appears to most preoccupy legal scholars of the UK and the Commonwealth, understandably, while the more pressing question for US legal scholars, with religious disestablishment and religious protections, is the definition of “religion” itself. Given the importance placed on taxation in defining church establishment in American historiography, the most striking finding in British legal scholarship is that taxation is seldom invoked at all.

C. R. Munro, in answering whether Scotland truly has an established church, synthesizes the definitions given in the Oxford Companion to Law and the Scottish case of *Marshall v. Graham* in 1907. Munro concludes that an established church is one having “official recognition or approval, above other religions, and a different status in the constitution of laws of the land,” determining that Scotland has a “light”

establishment.<sup>21</sup> There are two ways that Rhode Island could fit into Munro's definition. First, there were some instances in eighteenth-century Rhode Island law that privileged specific denominations. Second, because Rhode Island law overwhelmingly favored Protestant Christianity, and explicitly so, Protestantism itself fits this definition, especially as he writes "religion" rather than "church." However, I would argue that, at the very least, such a definition should be contingent upon *consistent* "recognition and approval," which would exclude Rhode Island by the first approach, if not the second.

M. H. Ogilvie's definition has more meat on its bones, defining it as "single church within a country accepted and recognized by the state in its doctrine, worship, and discipline as the truest expression of Christianity within that country." Furthermore, "The state's recognition of its established church encumbers that state with the legal duty to protect, preserve and defend that church, if necessary to the exclusion of all others," concluding that Canada's situation is multivalent and complex, with certain provinces having formal establishments and "quasi" establishments that resemble the early United States.<sup>22</sup> Although Roger Williams and other prominent early Rhode Islanders saw it as their duty to use Rhode Island in service to protecting Protestantism, this fails Ogilvie's "single church" criterion.

Norman Doe gives a much more thorough ten-point checklist:

- (1) a church which is recognised as such by both civil law and canon law;
- (2) a church in which the style of government reflects the constitutional tradition and culture of the nation;

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<sup>21</sup> C. R. Munro, "Does Scotland Have an Established Church?" *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 4, no. 20 (Jan. 1997): 640, 645.

<sup>22</sup> M. H. Ogilvie, "What is a Church by Law Established?" *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 28, 1 (Spring 1990): 235.

(3) a church in which ecclesiastical jurisdiction is determined by national boundaries, and in which ecclesiastical units cover the whole of the nation territorially;

(4) a church which participates directly in the public events of the nation (such as legislative activity and national ceremonial occasions);

(5) a church in whose affairs the nation through the State has a part to play;

(6) a church whose mission is linked explicitly to the spiritual and temporal concerns of the nation;

(7) a church in which nationality and citizenship may or may not have legal consequences for the membership of the church;

(8) a church which has a national ministry owed by its officers (particularly in pastoral matters) to the nation and all its citizens;

(9) a church in which liturgical events and ritual ministrations are available to the whole nation by means of legal rights and duties;

(10) a church whose property is perceived to be part of the national heritage and accessible to the public, even though that property is owned legally by ecclesiastical bodies.<sup>23</sup>

Most colonies in early modern British North America could not pass this exhaustive test any more readily than Rhode Island. As McConnell observes, in English colonial America, “no single law created the established church. Rather, it was

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<sup>23</sup> Norman Doe, “The Notion of a National Church: A Juridical Framework,” *Law & Justice—The Christian Law Review* 149 (2002): 90-91.

constituted by a web of legislation, common law, and longstanding practice.”<sup>24</sup> Although that “web” could capture all those criteria, many colonies’ webs did not.

In the context of the UK and the Commonwealth, none of the scholars discussed above included taxation, or even financial support, in their definitions. Yet in the American context, historians often implicitly consider taxation as the paramount criterion for establishment. Although a prominent one in the American context, it was not always an essential one. During Virginia’s protracted disestablishment of the Anglican church between 1776 and 1786, the Assembly continued to refer to it as the “church by law established” even after taxes to support it had been repealed; indeed, there is no church tax in the UK today.<sup>25</sup> Massachusetts Bay did not begin collecting taxes to support ministers until 1638, after the controversies that helped create Rhode Island.<sup>26</sup> If one considers taxes the sole, or most important, measure of an established church, then one must concede that Massachusetts Bay did not have one when it banished Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson. Plymouth did not follow Massachusetts Bay’s lead on taxes until 1657.<sup>27</sup> That these facts strike us as novel points to the weight that early Americanists put on financial support as a critical condition of establishment. Yet the apparent absurdity of claiming that Massachusetts Bay had no established church during the controversies of Williams and Hutchinson prompts reconsideration of implied definitions.

Even taking the privileging of taxes in the definition of an established church as a given, that also forces us to consider pluralistic establishments in colonial New England.

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<sup>24</sup> McConnell, p. 2111.

<sup>25</sup> McConnell, p. 2112.

<sup>26</sup> McConnell, p. 2152.

<sup>27</sup> J. M. Bumsted, “A Well-Bound Toleration: Church and State in the Plymouth Colony,” *Journal of Church and State* 10, no. 2 (Spring 1968): 270.

When Plymouth began collecting taxes for ministers, it supported both Baptist and Congregational ministers; there were virtually no defined theological requirements for Plymouth ministers.<sup>28</sup> After 1692, Massachusetts statutes did not require tax supported ministers to be Congregationalist, even though most continued to be. The Baptist church of Swansea, formerly part of Plymouth, was tax supported after absorption into Massachusetts, as were a few Unitarian churches in the early nineteenth century before Massachusetts disestablishment in 1833.<sup>29</sup> We might be tempted to see in Swansea proof that finances and bureaucratic support under the “New England Way” made an established church, not the denomination.

At the same time, the novelty of Swansea’s Baptist establishment in Massachusetts rests upon a presumption of discrete categories of “Baptist” and “Congregational.” These cases remind us that although theological distinctions from this century appear razor sharp from a twenty-first century vantage point, what complicated the question of church establishment was that some denominational boundaries were quite soft, especially in the seventeenth century. Calling the tax-supported ministers in Plymouth “Congregational” and “Baptist” may be misleading; it may be more accurate to distinguish them as puritans who believed in infant baptism and puritans who believed in adult baptism.<sup>30</sup> The wires get even more hopelessly crossed when we consider puritans and separatists. While separatists, usually considered puritans, explicitly proclaimed their disunion from the Church of England, most puritans considered themselves reformers—or purifiers—of the Church of England. Massachusetts made its position on this quite

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<sup>28</sup> Bumsted, p. 273.

<sup>29</sup> McConnell, p. 2123.

<sup>30</sup> To Bumsted’s credit, he does describe the distinction in these terms, as “pedobaptists” and “antipedobaptists.”

clear, as Roger Williams' separatism was one of the points of contention in the events that led to his banishment. As such, "puritan" was not a discrete denomination, but an umbrella term that encompassed individuals and churches under multiple hierarchies and with multiple theologies and liturgies.<sup>31</sup> As stated earlier, legal scholars generally agree that the Church of England is not the *de facto* established church beyond England itself without explicit establishment by the country or colony in question, and so not even in a theoretical sense can the argument be made that the Church of England was, in fact, the established church of seventeenth-century Massachusetts. At the same time, Swansea forces us to consider: perhaps neither was Congregationalism.

The implications of these considerations of taxation and denomination dramatically lower the stakes of whether a New England colony had an established church. When we consider that the majority of Rhode Island towns outside of Providence and Newport only had one church, Massachusetts and Plymouth pluralistic establishment makes it look less exceptional that there were two main competing denominations in Rhode Island, Baptist and Quaker, with a few Congregational and Anglican outliers, and makes the lack of tax support a sharper distinction than denominational differences.<sup>32</sup> By the vaguer British-centric definitions of an "established church" as one with a privileged position in the law, Rhode Island looks like it could have one except that it was non-denominational. Blurred denominational lines are less of an issue against the New England measure, but lack of direct support from colonial governments were.

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<sup>31</sup> See Michael Winship, "Were There Any Puritans in New England?" *The New England Quarterly* 74, No. 1 (March 2001): 118-138.

<sup>32</sup> See Alison G. Olson, "Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and the Question of Religious Diversity in Colonial New England," *NEQ* 65, no. 1 (March 1992): 93-116.

If taxes were the most meaningful distinction in New England, it forces us to reconsider the importance of the fact that Rhode Island did not have church establishment. Considering the complicated reality of religious establishment in early New England shows us that we saddle the statement that “colonial Rhode Island had no established church” with idealized implications that do not reflect the legal or cultural realities of the region. My aim is not to contend that Rhode Island had an established church, at any time. Even if we fully acknowledge how messy the work of defining an “established church” really is, most historians and legal scholars would still agree that colonial Rhode Island did not have one. Instead of challenging that interpretation, my intention is to ask: how much did it matter?

If an established church did not buoy Protestant hegemony in colonial Rhode Island, then what did? In the first chapter, I argue that Rhode Island law reflects not a religious liberty utopia, but the most basic elements of broad Protestant consensus. The first chapter is organized thematically and covers the course of the colonial and Revolutionary period, while the rest of the dissertation moves chronologically, as the topic of law deserves its own concerted analysis in order to ground my central argument. In the second chapter, I analyze Roger Williams’ controversy in Massachusetts and contact between Bostonians and exiles of the free grace controversy after their banishment. I argue that these two controversies influenced Rhode Island to privilege a version of “civility” that fostered the ability of dominant religious groups to maintain cultural and political hegemony even without church establishment, and that church disestablishment was not the universal aim of all who founded the colony. In the third chapter, I argue that late seventeenth-century Quaker marginalization in Rhode Island—



though surely not remotely comparable with the gallows in Massachusetts—inherited rhetoric from Massachusetts, hinged upon an assertion that Quakers were enemies to Protestantism, and indicated the stakes of transatlantic Protestantism in the colony. In the fourth chapter, I argue that early eighteenth-century Rhode Islanders utilized nascent conceptions of their seventeenth-century past to inform the growing religious diversity of their present. By the turn of the eighteenth century, as most North American English colonies adopted toleration policies of the mother country, Rhode Island’s legal approach to religion looked nearly identical to its neighbors—except for taxes—at precisely the moment that some New Englanders were busy constructing an idealized narrative of Rhode Island’s heritage of religious liberty. This dissonance wore some Rhode Islanders down, especially as some primarily remembered the seventeenth century for religious infighting—not least in Rhode Island. In the fifth chapter, I argue that Revolutionary Rhode Islanders approached the American Revolution with caution and cynicism due to disappointments with the difference between idyllic visions of liberty, religious and otherwise, and the reality of their home and the war. While many in the rest of the new nation grappled with disestablishment for the first time, many Rhode Islanders strongly defended the influence of religion in government.

To conclude with a reflection on the words of Sydney James:

The words “except in Rhode Island” spring too readily to the lips when uttering general remarks about colonial America. In many respects New England was homogeneous; in many others, Rhode Island was not. It is necessary to see the exceptional qualities of the heretic colony in perspective against diversity within its borders, against its conformity to

regional patterns, and against the presence of variation throughout the region. If this delicate task of judgment can be performed, then a harder one may be undertaken: evaluating the extent to which Rhode Island shared characteristics with the other English colonies in North America.<sup>33</sup>

Historians have acknowledged the limits of Rhode Island's radicalism, but have also dismissed those limits as inevitabilities of the early modern English Atlantic world. Indeed, many of the limits to the radicalism that disestablishment could yield in the early modern period still exist in the United States in the early twenty-first century. Yet this presents a paradoxical colony that was both singularly radical beyond all other places in the empire and inevitably incapable of overcoming the norms of its time. If we assert that Rhode Island was radical, then we cannot assume that the limits to this radicalism were natural and inevitable. Analysis, rather than dismissal, of those limits furthers our understanding of exactly how early modern English Protestantism functioned and thrived.

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<sup>33</sup> James, *Colonial Rhode Island: A History* (New York: Scribner, 1975), p. xvi.

## Chapter I

### Wielding the “Civil Sword”: Religion and the Law in Colonial Rhode Island

“Although wee know by man not any can be forced to worship God or for to keep holy or not to keep holy any day,” the General Assembly began in a 1673 act, the political body proceeded to push the latter. Because on “the first dayes of weeks, it is usuall for parents and masters not to imploy their children or servants as upon other dayes,” the first day of the week dangerously provided the opportunity for “tippling and unlawfull games and wantonness.” As such, “on the first dayes of the weeks whoever he be that doth lett any have any drink, that he or any other is drunk thereby... shall forfeitt six shillings.” “Gameinge” on that day incurred the same fine. The Assembly ordered that a constable keep watch in every Rhode Island town to enforce this law. It made clear that their intention was “not to oppose or propagate any worship, but as by preventinge debaistnes,” and reiterated an earlier order stating that compelling any child, servant, or spouse to any form of worship by force went against Rhode Island law.<sup>34</sup> However, any means could be used by a master or parent to compel someone “under their government” to refrain from drinking and gaming on the first day of the week.<sup>35</sup>

The word “Sunday” does not appear in this act, possibly because the Assembly intentionally placed rhetorical emphasis on the *first* day of the week to target a breakaway Baptist sect. Not all Rhode Islanders who worshipped did so on Sunday. The previous

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<sup>34</sup> The General Assembly first articulated a prohibition on forced worship in the Joshua Verin case of 1637, discussed later in this chapter. Whether or not “servants” included enslaved people is not directly addressed in this act, but other acts of the General Assembly reference “white and black servants,” implying that the General Assembly intended the term “servant” to include enslaved Black Rhode Islanders.

<sup>35</sup> “Proceedings of the Generall Assembly of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, held at Newport, September the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1673,” John Russell Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, in New England*, Vol. II, (Providence: A. Crawford Greene and Co., 1857), pp. 503-504. In quoting this printed transcription, I maintain all capitalization, spelling, and other transcription decisions in the 1857 printing. Dates are as they appear in the original sources; Julian calendar dates have not been converted to the Gregorian calendar.

year, several members of the First Baptist Church in Newport left the church to form a Seventh Day Baptist Church, which held Saturday to be the Sabbath.<sup>36</sup> Historians of the Jewish community in Rhode Island date the presence of Jewish Rhode Islanders, who observed Shabbat from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday, to at least as early as the 1650s.<sup>37</sup> Although the language of not forcing anyone to worship on the first day of the week sounds like a sincere desire to preserve religious liberty on the surface, the General Assembly may have intended to convey that it mattered not if you worshipped on Friday, Saturday, Sunday, or any other day: Sunday was the only Sabbath day that the General Assembly was willing to protect with the power of the law.

This act serves as one example of the ways that Rhode Island law sometimes favored specific denominations over others and privileged broad Protestant consensus, even when that sidelined some Protestants. The Assembly also tactfully employed a secular, civil reason for the decision to favor Sunday: because most freemen in the colony worshipped on Sunday, Sunday was the “usuall” day in which those prone to drinking and gaming had spare time to do so. The act also appealed to Rhode Island’s tight relationship to English law. The Sunday act was “by his Majestys authority enacted,” in keeping with “his Majestys open letters and pattents,” “agreeable to the lawes of his Majestyes realme of England.”<sup>38</sup> Debates about the relationship between the Sabbath and

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<sup>36</sup> For more on Seventh Day Baptists, the Sabbath, and the law in English colonial America and the United States, see Nicholas J. Kersten, “A Rock and a Hard Place: Seventh Day Baptists, Religious Liberty, Sabbath-Keeping, and Civil Authority,” *Baptist History and Heritage*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Summer 2008), pp. 58-67. For more on the split between Rhode Island Baptists, see J. Stanley Lemons, *Retracing Baptist in Rhode Island: Identity, Formation, and History* (Baylor, 2019).

<sup>37</sup> While historians long held that the purchase of the Jewish burial ground in 1678 marked the first concrete evidence of Jewish settlement in Rhode Island, the first historian to publish evidence of 1650s arrival was Samuel Oppenheim, “The First Settlement of the Jews in Newport: Some New Matter on the Subject,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, No. 34 (1937), pp. 1-10. Academic and public historians today still tend to favor Oppenheim’s proposed date of 1658.

<sup>38</sup> *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, Vol. II, pp. 503-504.

the law embroiled seventeenth-century England, and a simple prohibition on drinking and gambling fit squarely with existing English law.<sup>39</sup> Historian Edwin Gaustad writes that Parliament's passage of Sunday laws in Britain demonstrated British opposition to the kind of religious liberty that existed in Rhode Island. Although Parliament at this time was, indeed, skeptical of freedom of conscience, the Assembly's decision demonstrates that Sunday laws fit comfortably in Rhode Island's conception of religious liberty.<sup>40</sup> Gaustad is not alone in this oversight; few references to this law appear in published scholarship.<sup>41</sup>

The Assembly enacted these Sunday prohibitions in the same breath that they reworked existing laws pertaining to the sale of alcohol to Native Americans, which appear in the proceedings of the same day. Although already illegal for English people to sell liquor to any Native person in the colony, punishment previously came down harder on the Native person buying the liquor than the English person selling it. The Assembly lamented that English Rhode Islanders frequently solicited the sale of alcohol to Native Americans, confident that they were unlikely to be caught and punished, took the goods or money, and then never produced the liquor—leaving the fleeced purchaser, of course, with no legal recourse. The Assembly saw this as a serious threat to peaceful community relationships between the English and Narragansett. The new act lessened the punishment for the Native person purchasing the alcohol if they gave the name of the English person who sold it to them and increased the existing punishments for English people.

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<sup>39</sup> For more on seventeenth-century English Sabbath laws and the controversies surrounding them, see David S. Katz, *Sabbath and Sectarianism in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1988).

<sup>40</sup> Edwin Gaustad, *Roger Williams* (New York: Oxford, 2005), p. 92.

<sup>41</sup> Scott D. Gerber discusses the law in "Law and the Lively Experiment in Colonial Rhode Island," *British Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Fall 2013), 471-472. Gerber does analyze this law as being inherently Christocentric, but does not point out that even some Christians that worshipped on Saturday were also marginalized by the law. Gerber cites that the law was reprinted in the *Newport Historical Magazine* in 1881.

Furthermore, all freemen were required to submit inventories of their liquor to their town clerk and account for all liquor distributed.<sup>42</sup> Although not directly solving the bait-and-switch problem, this shoring up of English accountability certainly intended to make English people far less confident in their ability to evade the law.

That the Assembly voted on both acts in the same day suggests that perhaps tying up loose legal ends of alcohol sale itself was more front and center in the minds of the Assembly members than the Sabbath. At the same time, all three issues: when, and to whom, to sell alcohol; which day received explicit sanction from the colony as the Sabbath; and the relationships between European and Native American people living in the region, point to the preoccupation with order that had marked the English colony since its inception. In addition to order, Englishness, and broad Protestant consensus highlighted above, the separation of civil and ecclesiastical affairs and liberty of conscience also undergirded Rhode Island law.

However, historians must be careful and precise in discussing the meanings of “liberty of conscience” and “civil government” in the seventeenth-century English Atlantic. “Liberty of conscience” did not guarantee full citizenship and civil rights to all Europeans in the colony who would otherwise qualify, and “civil government” did not necessarily mean irreligious government. “Civil” implied lack of affiliation with a specific organized religious authority, not necessarily separation from religion itself. In the minds of many seventeenth-century dissenting English Protestants, Roger Williams included, the substance of true religion lay outside of organized authority. In other words, Rhode Island was only “secular” in terms of existing outside of ecclesiastical authority,

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<sup>42</sup> *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, Vol. II, pp. 500-503.

not “secular” in terms of eliminating religiosity from government.<sup>43</sup> That civil government would exist separately from organized churches did not necessarily mean that the government was intended to be less religious than a government headed by one denomination. From a dissenting Protestant perspective, it perhaps made it more so.

Colonial Rhode Island’s legal protections of religious liberty were not as singularly established, intentional, comprehensive, or unique as scholars continue to portray them. The original organized English settlements that eventually unified as Rhode Island and Providence Plantations each had their own founding relationship between religion and the law, including an unsuccessful attempt at maintaining an official church. When a royal charter brought these settlements under one colonial government, protections for religious liberty remained vague and their limits untested. Over the course of the colonial period, town governments, the courts, and the General Assembly dealt with unresolved issues related to religion and the law as they arose in real time. Furthermore, the colonial government’s approach to religion existed concurrently with similar approaches gaining traction in Britain and other English colonies, making Rhode Island one participant among many in a broad movement towards religious liberty in the English Atlantic world.

In championing the ambitions of early English colonists in Rhode Island, renowned Rhode Island historian Sydney James wrote, “No longer was government

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<sup>43</sup> This framing comes from the definitions of secularism offered by historian and philosopher Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2007). In Taylor’s framing, secularity can be defined three ways: 1) realms of life not institutionally connected to religion although religion influences them, 2) realms of life are devoid of religious influence as well as institutional affiliation, even though the surrounding society is religious, and 3) complete lack of participation in religion as a realistically acceptable choice in a given society. Colonial Rhode Island’s “civil government” fits squarely with Taylor’s first definition of secular in that it existed as an institution made up of religious people who did not shy away from the influence of religion in the institution even though it had no formal affiliation with a religious organization.

conceived of as having a divine source; no longer would secular power be put behind any religious purpose.”<sup>44</sup> Neither of those pronouncements are true. Roger Williams and other prominent Rhode Island figures only wished to keep institutional, organized religion, in the form of specific denominations, separate from the civil government, not religion itself. Secular power was applied to religious purpose. Williams himself proclaimed, “I was never against the righteous use of the civil sword,” and firmly believed that Christian behavior should be regulated by the government.<sup>45</sup> As one of the foremost Rhode Island historians of the twentieth century, James was certainly aware of and understood these caveats. In particular, James carefully delineates ways that Rhode Island churches sought government support.<sup>46</sup> However, he dismisses challenges to Rhode Island’s religious liberty as inevitabilities of Rhode Island’s time and place that do not cumulatively transform the narrative.<sup>47</sup> If true that Rhode Island’s radicalism extended to the most remote boundaries of what was possible in the early modern English Atlantic, then the colony provides a compelling opportunity to map those boundaries rather than dismiss them as inevitable. What is more, the Protestant synthesis formed as a result of collision with those boundaries amounts to more than the sum of its parts.

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<sup>44</sup> Sydney V. James and Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *John Clarke and His Legacies: Religion and Law in Colonial Rhode Island, 1638-1750* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), p. 15.

<sup>45</sup> *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, Vol. I, p. 293. Williams stated this in a 1654 letter to the Massachusetts General Court. In the letter, he states that Ninigret and other Narragansetts informed him that other Native Americans converted to Christianity by Massachusetts puritans were threatening war if the Narragansetts did not convert. He pleads for peace, but couches that plea in caveats that he considers it “glorious” how successful Massachusetts puritans have been in Native conversion, and makes clear that he “speaks not ironically.” His contention that he does not oppose, on principle, “righteous use of the civil sword,” is meant as a caveat to this plea for peace.

<sup>46</sup> James, *The Colonial Metamorphoses in Rhode Island: A Study of Institutions in Change* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 200), p. 11.

<sup>47</sup> James and Milton M. Klein, *Colonial Rhode Island: A History* (New York: Scribner, 1975), p. 74.



A systematic search of the proceedings of the General Assembly from its founding through the Revolution brings previously ignored laws that intersect with religious liberty to light. Neglected in Rhode Island historiography are the Sunday law, privileges for religious ministers, the issue of conscientious exemptions from militia service, the incorporation of Newport's Trinity Church as a "body politic" with a colonial seal, and churches seeking the General Assembly's assistance in raising funds. I also include research from the Providence Town Council and Town Meeting.

In covering law and governance over the course of the entire colonial period from the founding to the American Revolution, this chapter departs from the chapters following it—which each cover a shorter segment of the colonial period and move chronologically—in order to account for change over time that is often missing from Rhode Island legal historiography. It is common for scholars to make vague pronouncements about Rhode Island's religious liberty because they rely on the equally vague language of founding documents without analyzing how the principles outlined in these documents were applied, and further elaborated on, after they became law over the course of the colonial period. Not only have historians leaned too heavily on founding documents when crafting their narratives, they have also misunderstood those documents. This chapter adds necessary context to understanding the language of founding documents while also explaining how their later publication history contributed to interpretive distortions.

### **Williams and the Law**

Before delving into the founding of Providence's earliest English colonial government, it is first necessary to analyze the origins of founder Roger Williams' beliefs

about the relationship between religion and the law in order to demonstrate their origins in broader English Atlantic discourses and assess the level of influence of those beliefs on its founding. My intention in doing so is not to further the narrative that Providence was the brainchild of a singular, exceptionally unique mind. Although Williams, as an individual, was influential in establishing the first English settlement at Providence, his vision for governance of the settlement did not materialize out of thin air. Williams formed his ideas about civil government and the role of religion in government through his personal and professional networks, puritan ideas of the separation of civil and ecclesiastical powers, and broader calls for religious liberty in the English Atlantic. Furthermore, because most of his activities in early Providence were not done in the capacity of a formal office, he simply did not have the power to unilaterally impose his will on the colony, even if he wished to.

L. Raymond Camp emphasizes the influence of judge Edward Coke on Williams' beliefs about the separation of civil and religious authority. Coke employed Williams as a clerk when he was approximately thirteen or fourteen years old and became a close mentor of the young Williams, paying his tuition to the Charterhouse School. Coke's career revolved around his legal battles with Archbishops George Abbott and William Laud, who attempted to increase the influence of the Court of High Commission, Britain's ecclesiastical court, on common law. Coke favored keeping common law secular and championed freedom of conscience.<sup>48</sup> He also crafted a new legal theory that English common law only applied to lands settled peacefully, through an equitable

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<sup>48</sup> L. Raymond Camp, *Roger Williams, God's Apostle of Advocacy: Biography and Rhetoric* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), pp. 32-43.

exchange. This significantly influenced Williams' belief that the common law could only apply to Rhode Island through the fair purchasing of lands from the Narragansett.<sup>49</sup>

Instead of emphasizing the influence of Edward Coke on Williams' opinions on the separation of civil and ecclesiastical affairs, Edmund Morgan places Williams' opinions squarely within an existing set of puritan beliefs about the relationship between a civil government and the church. Morgan carefully delineates the difference between "conscience" and "religion" in Williams' opinion about the relationship to the law. Massachusetts Bay, he contends, strived toward greater separation of church and state than England itself and most English colonies. To a twenty-first-century reader, such an argument may sound absurd, but Morgan makes the critical distinction between religion as an institution and religion as a set of beliefs. Massachusetts Bay did, indeed, maintain more distance between civil and ecclesiastical powers than England. However, that did not mean that puritan beliefs were not expected to act as the basis for lawmaking. Similarly, Williams' beliefs in freedom of conscience and a separation of civil and religious bodies did not mean that he believed the government should play no role in enforcing a specifically Christian morality. Most historians neglect to interrogate what exactly Williams meant in his belief that civil government should still enforce "sober" and "civil" behavior, but Morgan makes clear that Williams, rather than simply unconsciously neglecting to consider the existence of other moralities besides those of Protestant Christianity, quite intentionally made the case that governments were

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<sup>49</sup> Ernest G. Mayo, "Rhode Island's Reception of the Common Law," *Suffolk University Law Review*, Vol. 31 (1998), pp. 609-623. Curiously, Mayo never mentions that Coke was Williams' mentor.

responsible for enforcing Protestant Christian behavior, even with freedom of worship and freedom of conscience as a given.<sup>50</sup>

Edwin Gaustad takes interpreting Williams' opinions one step further than the influence of puritan discourse, placing emphasis on growing calls against religious persecution in Britain and its colonies writ large.<sup>51</sup> However, his treatment of Williams' concept of "civility" largely ignores the theological specifics that Morgan analyzed.<sup>52</sup> Bruce Daniels also attributes Rhode Island's colonial governance to puritan discourse, but adds concrete implications for Rhode Island governance previous scholars had neglected. Williams agreed with the writings of separatist puritan John Robinson that no nation since Israel could claim to be holy or a government ordained by God, an angle that Morgan, Camp, and Gaustad also covered. Daniels also echo's Morgan's provocative assertion that "Williams' views on these secular ends of government were similar to those of his more conservative counterparts in Massachusetts." However, he takes this a step further to argue that the separatist intellectual tradition that Williams inherited translated to "an inclination toward democracy and a propensity for localism" in colonial Rhode Island government.<sup>53</sup>

In his dissertation, Raymond Dye Irwin, taking all the above influences into account, posits that Williams' education records hold the only "certain clues" to the origins of his approach to religion and the law. Irwin points out that the earliest records revealing his opinions on these issues come from his time as a student at Pembroke

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<sup>50</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *Roger Williams: The Church and the State* (New York: Harcourt, 1967), pp. 63-85.

<sup>51</sup> Edwin Gaustad, "Roger Williams and his Legacy" in Patrick T. Conley, ed., *Liberty and Justice: A History of Law and Lawyers in Rhode Island, 1636-1998* (East Providence: Rhode Island Publications Society, 1998), p. 28.

<sup>52</sup> Gaustad, *Roger Williams*, p. 99

<sup>53</sup> Bruce Daniels, *Dissent and Conformity on Narragansett Bay: The Colonial Rhode Island Town* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), p. 4-5.

College, at Cambridge, where strict adherence to the Church of England was enforced. There, he began to seek out puritan writings on reform. He also stresses the puritan network he became a part of in the first employment he took after graduation, as a private chaplain for a puritan household in Essex. Williams was not born into a puritan household; this placement was instrumental in his entrance into the puritan community. Irwin also highlights the influence of his separatist father-in-law, Richard Barnard.<sup>54</sup> Morgan, Camp, and Gaustad include these experiences, but do not delve as deeply into the ways that they influenced his ideology, treating them more as episodic moments between his time with Coke and the development of his puritan ideology after he had already been a puritan for some time.

Although the historiography of Williams' beliefs about the relationship between religion and the law is so extensive as to leave few, if any, stones unturned, the countless pages already written about Williams' thought still sidestep a couple of key considerations. All these arguments about Williams' influences, while implying his singular importance, orbit around a central, under-articulated reality: few of the opinions he held were unique among puritans in Britain and English colonial America. The differences in opinion between Williams and the puritans of Massachusetts Bay were of degree, not of kind. Furthermore, only holding high office as president of the colony for a few short years in the 1650s, Williams' political influence was much more limited than most historiography implies. Like the ways that some scholars are imprecise in their use of phrases like "civil government" or "liberty of conscience," considering Williams as

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<sup>54</sup> Raymond Dye Irwin, "'Saints, Sinners, and Subjects': Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in Transatlantic Perspective, 1636-1665," Dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1996.

Providence's singular founder gives a misleading impression of how much actual political power he had—and did not have.

At the same time, examining how his experiences shaped his opinions about the relationship between religion and the law serves the important purpose of situating Rhode Island law's theological and intellectual foundations in transatlantic influences. Taking into account the legal battles between Coke and Laud, the universe of puritan thought in which Williams existed, and the Separatist puritan experience of existing within a British legal system that compelled allegiance to the Church of England in certain contexts casts the founding of Providence in a much clearer light.

### **“Only in Civil Things”: Providence in the 1630s**

Before the unification of Providence and the towns on the island then known as Rhode Island, now known as Aquidneck Island, the two groups of settlements existed in starkly opposing situations regarding religion and the law. While we continue to say that “Rhode Island” was founded only with a civil, secular government, we really mean Providence was founded only with a civil, secular government. However, if we are generous enough with the term “Rhode Island” before the unification of these Narragansett Bay settlements in 1643, the earliest English legal authority in Rhode Island would be the 1637 Providence Civil Compact. The compact is brief:

We whose names are hereunder, desirous to inhabit in the town of Providence, do promise to subject ourselves in active and 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 major consent of present inhabitants, masters of families, incorporated together in a Towne

fellowship, and others whom they shall admit unto them only in civil things.<sup>55</sup>

Again, “only in civil things” must not be mistaken for meaning that religion would not influence government, as Williams and other puritans considered the regulation of appropriate Protestant behavior as a civil matter. Yet the earliest records of the Providence Town Council temper this interpretation somewhat. The minutes are far from overflowing with religious language. God is mentioned few times, other than to reference the will of God in uncertain matters, such as future children “if it please God to give him,” not dissimilar to our continued legal use of the term “act of God.” Christ is referenced only in listing the date. The council recorded vital records—birth, deaths, and marriages, taking on a role ordinarily only fulfilled by a church, whether an Anglican parish in England itself or a congregation in neighboring Massachusetts. Transactions related to land are also recorded, such as purchases from the Narragansett by the English, sales between English people, or changes of ownership due to inheritance. The Council made other agreements related to the Narragansett, such as what could and could not be traded to them. It granted licenses for professions and to open taverns. “Strangers” and the poor were dealt with. Although the nature of the notetaking itself may have successfully hidden the religiosity of the early Town Council, its absence at the very least suggests little effort put into making the notes read as reverently religious, and might even suggest effort put into assuring that they referenced religion as little as possible.

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<sup>55</sup> The Compact is included in the Providence Town Council manuscripts, Providence City Hall Archives. All Town Council records were read in their original manuscript for this research, but I have also utilized the published edition: *Early Records of the Town of Providence*, v. 1 (Providence: Snow and Farnham, 1852).

The Town Meeting records also make little mention of religion, and no mention of religious liberty, with one significant exception well known to Rhode Island historiography. The entry for March 28, 1637 reads: “It was agreede that Joshua Verin upon ye breach of a covenant for restraining of ye liberty of consciensce shall be withheld from ye liberty of voting till he shall declare ye contrary.”<sup>56</sup> The General Assembly for the colony noted this verbatim in their proceedings the following May.<sup>57</sup> Verin and his wife, Jane, were close neighbors to Roger Williams. Jane attended Williams’ religious meetings. Joshua did not, and forbade Jane from continuing to attend. When she did against his wishes, Joshua reacted so violently that Jane feared for her life. After months of deliberation, Joshua was eventually banished from Providence, and returned to Salem, Massachusetts. Jane wished to stay in Providence, but was unfortunately forced by her husband to accompany him to Salem. It is important to note that the town specifically punished him for breach of his wife’s religious liberty, not directly for the violence he inflicted.

That the Verin case is unique in Providence’s early history could imply three things, none of which are necessarily mutually exclusive. First, it could imply that marital disagreements over religion that escalated to domestic violence were simply uncommon. Second, it could mean that Williams singled out the Verin case and brought it to the Town Meeting because of his personal connection to it—intentionally or unintentionally, if this happened to be the only case he knew of. Third, because the case set a legal precedent where none yet existed, and was widely known, colonists understood the consequences and decided to avoid them. The Verin case has been championed as both an early

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<sup>56</sup> *The Early Records of the Town of Providence*, Vol. 1, p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, Vol. 1, p. 16.



precedent for religious liberty in the colony and as an early victory for the protection of women against domestic violence in colonial America, yet few scholars have noted the complicated legal mechanics of this case. Extreme domestic violence was illegal under English law, but Joshua Verin was not punished for that. No law yet existed in the colony to protect someone from being prevented from worshipping at the meeting of their choosing; the case created a precedent where previously, nothing on paper indicated that religious intimidation was illegal in Providence. No formal “covenant of liberty of conscience,” in the language of the Town Meeting records, was recorded before this case. The Council went out of its way to only target the offense of infringing upon his wife’s religious liberty, instead of the lower-hanging fruit of simply charging him with violence. That makes the third proposed explanation for the case’s uniqueness—that it successfully warned off future cases of violent religious intimidation—the most compelling.

Furthermore, the punishments faced clearly communicate how the Providence Town Meeting interpreted the relationship between religious and civil liberties. One depended upon the other, and civil liberties could be taken away if religious liberties were not respected. The decision also framed separation of religion from colonial government as a substantive force of the law, not simply the absence of a formal relationship—in other words, something rather than nothing, or in the terminology of the Civil Compact, “active,” not “passive.” What the case communicated was that Providence was more than a town that happened to not have an established church; Providence made a commitment to actively protect freedom of worship, freedom of conscience, and freedom from religious violence.

That Providence did not follow “the New England Way” in the relationship between town and church government remains an unassailable fact. More so than other early Rhode Island settlements, the legal situation in Providence is the closest to the image maintained in Rhode Island heritage of a bold attempt at relatively radical religious liberty. And while the Town Council’s relative silence on religion does not necessarily mean that members considered it irreligious, the Town Council records themselves do not lend sufficient evidence to suggest that it was. Yet from the compact to the Verin case, we see that religious protections began nebulously and details worked out as issues arose, rather than Providence being founded with an already perfectly-formed calculus of religious liberty.

### **The Portsmouth-Newport Schism and Unification**

Portsmouth’s 1638 compact was as brief as the one drawn up for Providence, but contained more explicit religious language. It reads:

We whose names are underwritten do hereby solemnly in the presence of Jehovah incorporate ourselves into a Bodie Politick and as He shall help, will submit our persons, lives and estates unto our Lord Jesus Christ, the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, and to all those perfect and most absolute laws of His given in His Holy Word of truth, to be guided and judged thereby.<sup>58</sup>

As I have argued, this language in and of itself was not necessarily in conflict with the idea of a separation of ecclesiastical and civil powers, such as in Massachusetts,

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<sup>58</sup> Portsmouth Compact, 1638, Rhode Island State Archives.

or the absence of an official church, such as in Providence. However, William Coddington, who penned this compact, wished to craft a government with a town-supported official church. Coddington and his supporters echoed Williams in advocating for a government based on both English law and Biblical law, but pushed further than Williams in the specifics, making himself a judge, an office “modeled on the ancient Hebrew one” and based on John Cotton’s teachings. Like Massachusetts, church government and civil government would serve separate purposes.

This “avowedly theocratic regime” sharply divided Portsmouth.<sup>59</sup> Many saw this as a dangerous replication of their experiences in Massachusetts, regardless of whether their faith was the orthodox one this time, and banished Coddington, who later established Newport. “They kept the theocratic oligarchical government for a year, then went over to a secular foundation and use of the English law.”<sup>60</sup> Newport and Portsmouth later reunited with Coddington as governor. Samuel Gorton also left the settlement to found Warwick, which Bruce Daniels argues went in the opposite direction of Coddington’s vision, attempting to establish “a principle of liberty of consciences over into civil affairs” to an even greater degree than Providence.<sup>61</sup> The dramatic politics of Newport and Portsmouth’s establishments, pitting Massachusetts-style “theocracy” against the kind of civil-only government functioning in Providence, are too often dismissed as simply a bump in the road on the way to Rhode Island’s inevitable status as a colony established without an official church.

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<sup>59</sup> James, *John Clarke and His Legacies*, p. 13.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>61</sup> Bruce C. Daniels, “Dissent and Disorder: The Radical Impulse and Early Government in the Founding of Rhode Island,” *Journal of Church and State*, Vol.24, No. 2 (1982), p. 362.

## The 1640s: Parliament Unites Rhode Island

In the midst of these diverse approaches to religious liberty, Williams sought the aid of Parliament in uniting Providence and Rhode Island under Providence's developing legal culture of civil government. At this point in England's political crisis, a royal charter would not do, as Parliamentary authority could be more surely counted on. Williams also had good reason to believe that Parliament would be more supportive of his endeavor than the Crown, as many in Parliament wished to create a similar form of civil government to what Williams had established in Providence.<sup>62</sup> Although Portsmouth pledged loyalty to Charles I in 1639, by the early 1640s, most New Englanders, including Rhode Islanders, were loyal to Parliament. Providence went as far as to strike out references to the Crown in Town Council documents and write in "Commonwealth" in their place. Furthermore, as Morgan and Camp highlight, Williams was well known and well liked in the rising puritan establishment in Parliament, managing to land several one-on-one discussions with Oliver Cromwell.

Although historiography often describes the patent as "uniting" Providence and Rhode Island, and although "Rhode Island" is the name that stuck, the patent makes more apparent that this was an absorption of the island towns into Providence's existing government. The 1643 parliamentary patent does not contain the words "Rhode Island" at all, instead labeling both groups of settlements as only "Providence Plantations." In 1647, Acts and Orders were "made and agreed upon at the General Court of Election, held at Portsmouth on Rhode-Island... for the Colony and Province of Providence," further

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<sup>62</sup> See Jonathan Beecher Field, "A Key for the Gate: Roger Williams, Parliament, and Providence," *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 80, No. 3 (Sept. 2007), pp. 353-382.

indicating the framing of Providence as the true origin of the colonial government. The first order of business in those acts and orders was to include Warwick in the colony, a settlement led by Samuel Gorton that established a civil government like that of Providence. Next, to parcel smaller settlements to the larger ones, with Prudence given to Portsmouth, and Pawtuxet to decide whether to become part of Providence, Portsmouth, or Newport.

Though longer than Providence's 1637 Civil Compact, the 1643 Parliamentary Patent that united Providence and Rhode Island mirrors the 1637 compact's language of civil government. Just like the compact, the patent makes no explicit mention whatsoever of religion, or even Christians, but does use the phrase "Civil Government" multiple times. By this, the intention is clear that the same type of government in Providence was intended to be implemented on Rhode Island as well. Although not directly referencing religion, the patent calls for "better governing and preserving of the said Plantations and Islands from open violence, prejudice, disturbance, and distractions." Against the backdrop of the religious conflict that existed on Rhode Island, one can interpret this passage as a direct call for a cease of religious infighting. Few historians have pointed out how little the issue of religion appears in the Parliamentary Patent compared to the more explicit religious language of the future Royal Charter, instead referencing the Patent as simply a placeholder for the future charter and giving the misleading impression that both dealt with the issue of religious liberty to the same degree.

An important point to note regarding the patent is that it insists that any laws in Rhode Island "be conformable to the laws of England." Historiographically, this is often written as a wholesale lifting of English civil law into Rhode Island, simply leaving

behind conformity to the Church of England. However, the distinction that whatever laws Rhode Island passed simply had to conform to English law meant that the General Assembly for the colony, as well as the town councils, had significant agency in crafting Rhode Island law.

Returning to the Acts and Orders, we see the most explicit legal protection of religious liberty to date:

It is agreed, by this present Assembly... that the form of government established in Providence Plantations is Democratical, that is to say, a government held by the free and voluntary consent of all... And now, to the end we may give, each to other, notwithstanding our different consciences touching the truth as it is in Jesus, whereof, upon the point we all make mention, as good and hopeful assurance as we are able, touching each man's peaceable and quiet enjoyment of his lawful right and liberty...

This is not only much more specific than previous constructions of "civil government," but also makes more explicit that these protections do not extend universally, but only to Christians. At the same time, it also does not guarantee universal rights to assembly and worship, only that one's conscience should not factor into civic participation. Not only did Williams and others make clear early on that those limits were initially intended, but those limits were proven to be intended in the future by religious minorities challenging them. These Acts and Orders also prove what the Providence Town Council records could not: that this was a "civil" government did not make it an irreligious one. In the passage above, it is clear that governance rests upon a Protestant Christian consensus. Furthermore, in those Acts and Orders, witchcraft, sodomy, and

bestiality were listed as offenses punishable by death. Providence was a “secular” government in its lack of affiliation, but its religiosity in these 1640s documents is crystal clear.<sup>63</sup>

One interpretive problem with the 1630s sources’ lack of religiosity and the 1640s sources’ overwhelming religiosity is that the absorption of Newport and Portsmouth may have made Providence government more religious than before. It is possible that Williams and others intentionally increased their use of religious language, and intentionally made clearer that civil government should still include religious influence, in order to assure resistant figures in the Rhode Island settlements. In all these developments before the adoption of the Royal Charter, we see that what religious liberty meant to the English people settling along the shores of Narragansett Bay was heavily contested.

### **The Royal Charter**

...that they, pursuing, with peaceable and loyal minds, their sober, serious, and religious intentions, of godly edifying themselves, and one another, in the holy Christian faith and worship, as they were persuaded; together with the gaining over and conversion of the poor ignorant Indian natives, in those parts of America, to the sincere profession and obedience of the same faith and worship...

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<sup>63</sup> For more on sexuality and the law in Rhode Island, see Abby Chandler, *Law and Sexual Misconduct in New England, 1650-1750: Steering Toward England* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015).

Rhode Islanders pledged their loyalty to Charles II upon the Restoration. Concerned for the authority of the Parliamentary Patent, John Clarke traveled to England to secure a royal charter.<sup>64</sup> While previous authorities ensured “civil government” and liberty of conscience for Christians, the 1663 Royal Charter specifically adds the freedom of worship to that set of rights. Also evident in the above excerpt was affirmation and support for missionary efforts directed toward the Narragansett. Previous to the charter, Williams had discouraged forceful Native conversion, as well as intervention from missionary groups. Including support for this in the charter gave such groups greater permission. Taken together, this prompts a reading of the charter as one consciously promoting Christianity, while securing protections for dissenting Protestant Christians.

...because some of the people and inhabitants of the same colony cannot, in their private opinions, conform to the public exercise of religion, according to the liturgy, forms and ceremonies of the Church of England, or take or subscribe the oaths and articles made and established in that behalf; and for that the same, by reason of the remote distances of those places, will (as we hope) be no breach of the unity and uniformity established in this nation: Have therefore thought fit, and do hereby publish, grant, ordain and declare, that our royal will and pleasure is, 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, and do not actually disturb the civil peace of our said colony; but that all and every person and persons may, from

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<sup>64</sup> See James, *John Clarke and His Legacies*, pp. 59-83.



time to time, and at all times hereafter, freely and fully have and enjoy his and their own judgments and consciences, in matters of religious concernments, throughout the tract of land hereafter mentioned, they behaving themselves peaceably and quietly, and not using this liberty to licentiousness and profaneness, nor to the civil injury or outward disturbance of others, any law, statute, or clause therein contained, or to be contained, usage or custom of this realm, to the contrary hereof, in any wise notwithstanding.

Sydney James noted that this passage contains parts copied from Charles II's Declaration of Breda, and notes similar vagueness and lack of substance.<sup>65</sup> Gaustad points out that New Jersey and the Carolina colony took on language of Rhode Island charter in order to argue for Rhode Island's unique influence, but does not take into account that the Rhode Island charter was based on Declaration of Breda, and therefore that was the likelier source of the charters in New Jersey and Carolina.<sup>66</sup> The charter's relationship to broader influences of the English Atlantic further demonstrate the ways that the radicalism of Rhode Island law and governance has been overstated.

Notably, this passage, unlike the one previous, protects "religion" more broadly than Christianity. In other words, Christians explicitly had freedom of worship, and, in theory, all had liberty of conscience, so long as they did not break the law nor disturb the peace. However, the next few decades of Rhode Island history would see rigorous testing of these protections as the colony's religious diversity increased.

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<sup>65</sup> James, *John Clarke and his Legacies*, p. 63.

<sup>66</sup> See Edwin Gaustad, "Roger Williams and his Legacy" in Patrick T. Conley, ed., *Liberty and Justice: A History of Law and Lawyers in Rhode Island, 1636-1998* (East Providence: Rhode Island Publications Society, 1998).

## The Rhode Island Way

The relationship between churches and civil government became more entangled as churches grew. General Assembly proceedings over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries indicate that Protestant sects typically interacted with town and colonial government in establishing churches, building them, and maintaining ministers of those churches. Since Rhode Island's earliest English settlements, civic and ecclesiastical governance existed separately, or so the law assured. As opposed to the "New England Way," in which a church and a town were coterminous, town incorporation in Rhode Island rested upon the recognition of rights to property. The earliest towns to incorporate were Providence, Newport, and Portsmouth, incorporated in the Parliamentary Patent of 1643. Warwick was the only additional settlement to be granted incorporation in the 1663 Charter that had not been granted incorporation in 1643. As new settlements were established after the 1663 Charter, they were incorporated by the Assembly. As for churches, some denominations carved congregations along geographic lines, similar to the New England way, but independently of town boundaries. To be sure, many of those boundaries very nearly overlapped. More importantly than whether the two sets of boundaries matched was that two entirely separate authorities drew them.

As the colony developed, so did friction between these competing landscapes. For all churches, those that determined congregations by geography or not, the eighteenth century saw the firm legal determination of what precisely fell under the authority of the town or colony and what fell under the authority of a church. This parallel relationship solidified as the number of churches and towns increased during the eighteenth century.

As with religious liberty, the General Assembly clarified ambiguities and untangled inconsistent governance as the problems themselves arose. In this complicated legal landscape, churches, in some ways, held a degree of legal personhood. Rhode Island's earliest religious meetings took place in private homes, or outdoors, on property that belonged to an individual. By the time meetinghouses were being constructed in the late seventeenth century, churches could buy and sell property as an organized legal entity.

A shift from commonwealth to proprietorship in the early eighteenth century caused lasting changes in the role of town government. Rhode Island historians offer multiple explanations for both the causes and the legacies of this shift in English land ownership and settlement in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, most acknowledging that town government weakened, but offering nuanced explanations for how. Bruce Daniels argues that the 1663 charter gave the colony and the Crown oppressive power over towns, weakening the authority of town government.<sup>67</sup> However, the charter still gave towns the power to oversee the buying and selling of land within the colony's recognized boundaries. In the decades prior to the Dominion of New England (1686-9), Rhode Island towns oversaw the buying and selling of land from proprietors in these new towns and, in most cases, validated the legitimacy of land purchases from the Narragansett. But under the Dominion government, and after, towns lost the powers to allocate land and approve the building of certain structures, such as mills and taverns, or even admitting inhabitants in rural areas, which were now under the purview of the colonial government. Either under town or Crown, proprietorships largely operated independently of civic institutions. James argues that because land transactions existed

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<sup>67</sup> See Daniels, *Dissent and Conformity on Narragansett Bay: The Colonial Rhode Island Town*

separately from most other local civic business, proprietors organized independently and “at odds with political communities,” which “produced disintegration” of the authority of some town governments.<sup>68</sup> In this case, it is the proprietors, not the colonial government or the crown, that weakened the town. Carl Bridenbaugh further argues that land transactions through independent proprietors created a “ladder of rights to land and standings in political community,” that was less egalitarian than the situation of Rhode Island’s early decades.<sup>69</sup>

It was in this landscape, James argues, that churches and the colonial government “began to form a loose and uneasy partnership” that both were reluctant to acknowledge.<sup>70</sup> One striking instance is the incorporation of a church as a “body politic” in 1769, Newport’s Anglican church, Trinity. Trinity Church was “empowered to make any laws or rules for the better regulating of the affairs of said church; provided, that such laws and rules be not repugnant to any laws of this colony.” The Governor promised to affix the colony’s seal on the church’s charter.<sup>71</sup> No other colonial Rhode Island church appears to have ever petitioned the General Assembly for this type of recognition. Trinity’s incorporation did not come with financial support, but it did lend government legitimacy to the institution. The proviso that the charter could not conflict with any colonial laws made the church responsible to, as well as supported by, the Rhode Island government.

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<sup>68</sup> Sydney James, *The Colonial Metamorphoses in Rhode Island: A Study of Institutions in Change* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2000), p. 6.

<sup>69</sup> Carl Bridenbaugh, *Fat Mutton and Liberty of Conscience: Society in Rhode Island, 1636-1690* (Providence: Brown, 1974).

<sup>70</sup> James, *John Clarke and his Legacies*, p. 124.

<sup>71</sup> *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, Vol. VI, p. 573.

This lone church incorporation came in the same decade as the only two instances in the General Assembly records of churches petitioning the Assembly about finances. In 1762, the Anglican church in Providence asked permission to establish a lottery to help pay for the improvement of their church building. The Assembly voted in favor, “provided, the directors give bond in double the sum of the lottery; and that no charge accrue to the colony.”<sup>72</sup> Five years later, the Baptist church in Warren also petitioned to hold a lottery to finish construction of the meeting house and parsonage. The congregation stressed that their pastor “hath now under his care several pupils to be educated in the liberal arts, who cannot be accommodated in the said house in its present condition.” The petition was granted with no further stipulations.<sup>73</sup> The Baptists asked to raise a much more meager sum, £150 compared to the Anglican church’s £1000, perhaps hinting that the stipulations of the Anglican church’s lottery were purely financial rather than influenced by the denomination, as much less was at stake in the Baptist’s petition. Although these lotteries did not cost the colony a farthing, the churches came to the colony for help with administering the lottery, citing that they had already failed to attempt to raise the funds themselves.

In 1716, the General Assembly enacted that “what maintenance or salary may be thought needful or necessary by any of the churches, congregations or societies of people now inhabiting, or that hereafter may inhabit within any part of this government, for the support of their, or either of their minister or ministers, may be raised by a free contribution, and no other ways.”<sup>74</sup> The timing of this act raises a series of questions.

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 530-531.

<sup>74</sup> *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, Vol. IV, p. 206.

Why was this enacted in 1716, and not earlier? Were any towns supporting ministers through imposed taxes prior to this act? Did some recent event transpire that prompted the Assembly to take action? Most historians who cite this 1716 law do so as evidence of Rhode Island's early adoption of a separation of civil government and religion, without adding up that that means towns in Rhode Island could have, theoretically, financially supported clergy during the previous eighty years of English colonial governance. This lends additional evidence to the argument that Rhode Island religious liberty developed ad hoc over time, rather than being granted at its founding. Rather than simply congratulating the General Assembly for doing this, historians could see this as a smoking gun for more entanglements between town government and churches yet to be found.

That the General Assembly adamantly made clear that public funds could not be used for the construction of churches or the maintenance of a minister lends significant support to Rhode Island's insistence that its government was an entirely civil one. Gaustad uses the label "libertarian" to describe the relationship between churches and the colonial government.<sup>75</sup> Yet these Assembly proceedings helpfully remind us that the colony did not exist in a purely libertarian situation with no interaction between churches and the government whatsoever and no regulation of churches. This may seem sufficiently self-evident to legal scholars and historians who do not address it, but the way that these relationships are left out of Rhode Island history can give a reader a false impression of exactly how separate government and churches truly were—and were not.

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<sup>75</sup> Gaustad in *Liberty and Justice*, p. 33.

While abolishing support for clergy seems to suggest a trend toward greater religious liberty, marriage law in eighteenth-century Rhode Island represents a clear case in point of the privileging of certain Protestant denominations in the law. The earliest town council meetings in Providence simply recorded marriages without listing where they were performed. In 1701, the General Assembly passed a law that all marriages must be officiated by the Justice of the Peace, excluding those performed “according to the Laws, Customs, Usage and Ceremony of the Church of England,” as well as Quaker marriages. In 1733, the General Assembly granted Baptists and Presbyterians the same privilege.<sup>76</sup> John Gorton, elder of the Six Principle Baptist Church from 1753 to 1792, kept meticulous marriage records.<sup>77</sup> In addition to his own records, individuals marrying, or family members on their behalf, sent written statements to the elders of the church, attesting to the legality of the marriage. These marriage statements usually included information such as the respective parents of the bride and groom as well as which town they were from. Some were written as concisely as possible; others verbosely attest to the lawfulness of the marriage. As the Six Principle Baptist Church itself did, these marriages often crossed colony boundaries, with one party in eastern Rhode Island and one on the south shore of Massachusetts. The Elder Gorton included a “point of law” in an undated note housed with the marriage records. “And if the persons that are to be married, Dweel in divers Parishes the Bans must be asked in both Parishes; and the Curate of the one Parish Shall not Solemnize Matrimony betwixt them, without a Sertificate of the Bans being Thrice asked, from the Curate of the other Parish.” Now that Baptists could announce and perform their own marriages, and their legitimacy lay in their authority, a

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<sup>76</sup> *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, Vol. IV, p. 490.

<sup>77</sup> General Six Principle Baptists Records, Rhode Island Historical Society.

tighter ecclesiastical structure was necessary to assert that authority where the colony itself once did.

The case of James McSparran also highlights the complicated entanglement of the colonial government and the church. In 1668, the proprietors of a purchase of land near present-day South Kingstown set aside three hundred acres for the use of an “orthodox” minister. However, it remained vacant until McSparran, an Anglican minister, attempted to claim the land for himself in the 1720s. This spurred a court case litigated over the course of nearly thirty years. McSparran arrived in Rhode Island in 1721 as a missionary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts; previously, missionary activity had been sparse in Rhode Island, influenced by seventeenth-century English Rhode Islander’s aversion to attempts to convert the Narragansett to Christianity. Although the 1663 charter outlined Native conversion as a priority of the colony, it was not until the increasing Anglican influence of the eighteenth century that missionary work took off in Rhode Island. McSparran’s presence also highlights another significant turn in Rhode Island history: he, like most English colonists in that region of the colony at that time, was an enslaver. By the mid eighteenth century, Rhode Island had at least five times as many enslaved people as elsewhere in New England.<sup>78</sup> The most pressing question for the Rhode Island courts was the definition of “orthodox.” The land had been set aside by the proprietors for an “orthodox” minister, but the court ruled that as there were no non-puritan Anglican ministers in Rhode Island in 1668, the definition of “orthodox” could not have included an Anglican minister like McSparran in its original meaning.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> For more information on the demographics of slavery and slavery in Rhode Island more broadly, see Christy Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island* (NYU, 2018).

<sup>79</sup> For more on the McSparran case, see chapter VI of Mary Sarah Bilder, “Salamanders and Sons of God: Transatlantic Legal Culture in Colonial Rhode Island,” Dissertation, Harvard, 2000.



Importantly, had McSparran been a Congregational minister, he likely would have won his case.

By the turn of the eighteenth century, enthusiasm for maintaining strict separation between churches and the colonial government had significantly waned. Although no single church could claim the position of Rhode Island's official church—except maybe Trinity, the only church officially incorporated as a “body politic” with a colonial seal—the privileging of certain Protestant sects over others matched the waxing and waning of contemporary political influences of those churches. Instead of continuing to assert that Rhode Island maintained strict separation between church and state, it is perhaps more accurate to argue that Rhode Island's churches and the colonial government interacted less, and in different ways, than in Britain and other British colonies.

### **Military Exemptions**

One of the ways in which Rhode Island maintained its commitment to liberty of conscience was through military exemptions, though the detailed stipulations and caveats of these exemptions changed over time, and the outbreak of war frayed and tested these exemptions. The first appearance of an exemption from military service due to religious beliefs came in 1673, when the General Assembly ruled that “neither he nor they shall at any time be compelled against his or their judgment and conscience to trayne, arm or fight, to kill any person or persons.” However, it required that “such said persons as are of sufficient able bodye and of strength (though exempt from arminge and fightinge), to conduct or convey out of the danger of the enemy, weake and aged impotent persons, women and children, goods and cattle... and shall be required to watch to informe of danger... and to perform any other civill service by order of the civill officers for the good

of the Collony, and inhabitants thereof.”<sup>80</sup> Those in the colony who held a strict theology of non-violence were not required to directly participate in war, but at the same time, they were not relieved of their duty to their colony and their community.

The outbreak of King Philip’s War tested Rhode Island’s resolve to preserve liberty of conscience. In May of 1676, the Assembly nullified the 1673 exemption, subjecting those who declined military service for religious reasons to the same fines as all others who failed to fulfill this duty for any reason. The following October, the Assembly reinstated the exemption. The act cited the fact that those employed to collect fines from conscientious objectors often “enter into their houses, and take some of their best things; and sometimes five times the value that they should by law.” This was another example, similar to the situation with selling alcohol to Native Americans, in which it was easy for a thief to take advantage of a person already in a legally vulnerable position. On the other hand, many facing the same fines for not serving for non-religious reasons had their fines excused. The reinstatement also hinted that the initial repeal of the exemption was partly due to suspicion that religious protections lead to “licentious practices, under pretense of conscience.”<sup>81</sup> It is critical to note that Quakers were most likely to benefit from conscientious objection to military service, and controversy over these objections arose contemporaneously with Williams’ and other Baptists’ vocal criticism of Quakers, analyzed in chapter three.

Because of Rhode Island’s diligence in keeping its own laws consistent with those of England, the colony prioritized consistency in the language of religious exemptions.

For the 1673 exemption, the General Assembly reasoned that since “the King’s Majesty

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<sup>80</sup> *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, Vol. II, pp. 498-499.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 553-555.

in the way of his wars doth not soe universally compell all, but permitts some, yea very many not to trayne or fight war for him, whose consciences are that they ought not to learne war nor war at all,” Rhode Island’s exemption was well within the bounds of English law.<sup>82</sup> Still, in 1686, the Quakers of Rhode Island sent an address to the King declaring their conscientious inability to bear arms and their commitment to supporting the colonial and English governments to the best of their ability in any other way.<sup>83</sup> This affirmed their commitment to following the law, their loyalty to the king, and that they did not simply intend to shirk their duty to their community.

When the potential for war once again raised the issue in 1726, the exemption was maintained, but with stronger caveats than in the 1673 law. The Assembly, “being in a daily expectation of a proclamation of war against Spain,” reiterated the laws of military service:

Always provided, that if the said delinquent person or persons shall plead that it is against his or their consciences to fight or bear any sort of arms or weapons to defend himself, his interest, and the interest of the colony against a common enemy, and for the confirmation of what he asserts, produce and deliver to his commander, or to the justice, a certificate from the congregation and meeting to which he or they do belong, or frequent, that they, the said meeting, do own him or them to be in unity with them, and that they are persuaded and do believe him or them to be truly conscientious in what he or they do declare against fighting, &c., that then

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 496.

<sup>83</sup> *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, Vol. III, p. 185.

the commander or justice, that shall receive such certificate, shall acquit and discharge such person or persons from paying any fine or fines.<sup>84</sup>

The Assembly had never asked for those seeking an exemption to produce a certificate in the past. There was more. In addition to the existing requirement to transmit intelligence when directed to and do all that one could to preserve life and property without taking up arms, those discharged from duty due to conscience were required to bring a horse to the militia, or show up in person to inform them that he did not have one. Furthermore, if someone who was exempted failed to do any of the above, he would be fined as if neglecting military service for any other reason.<sup>85</sup>

The requirements for a religious exemption to armed combat only continued to become more burdensome. 1741 saw a soft repeal of religious exemption altogether. For those whom it was “against their conscience to bear arms at all,” service as “scouts, messengers, watches, &c.” was mandatory. They were required to appear “at the Governor’s or magistrate’s” for their assignment when an alarm was made, with whatever horses they owned. If they did not, they would incur a fine of forty shillings for each day they did not appear.<sup>86</sup> In other words, while liberty of conscience could still technically exempt one from carrying a weapon, it no longer exempted one from participation in war, and the General Assembly was clearly determined to make the exemption as exasperating as possible to firmly deter anyone from seeking it who did not sincerely wish for it. In raising a regiment in 1756, the Assembly referenced an exemption for conscience, without elaborating on the previously drawn-up provisos, nor adding any more.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, Vol. IV, pp. 377-379.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 380.

<sup>86</sup> *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, Vol. V, p. 5.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 535.

The American Revolution stretched Rhode Island's ability to accommodate a religious exemption to its breaking point. On April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1777, the General Assembly enacted an addition to the previous "Act for the Relief of Persons of tender Consciences."

WHEREAS the Invasion of this and the other United States of America, by a powerful Enemy, occasions great Distress, and very heavy Burthen of Expence, upon the Inhabitants: And whereas many Persons within this State, possessing Property therin, have availed themselves of the Act aforesaid, and avoided contributing their equal and necessary Proportion for the Defence of our Rights, Privileges and Estates, and from which they do and will derive, in all Respects, equal Benefit and Protection with other Subjects of this States, not exempted from personal military Service.

Those previously exempted, including those who had "produced Certificates from the Meetings of Friends," were now required to be "draughted."<sup>88</sup> This act emphasized both the sheer necessity of needing every body the state could possibly muster, and that it was unjust for those who expected protection from the state to decline to contribute to it.

Conscientious objections to military service in colonial Rhode Island always stood on unstable ground, with both King Philip's War and the American Revolution prompting outright repeals, and exemptions in between coming with provisos that nearly amounted to little exemption at all. Most Americans would not face the difficult question of the limits of religious exemption when such exemptions could potentially threaten the well-being of the entire community until much later in the nation's history.

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<sup>88</sup> "State of Rhode-Island and Providence Plantations. IN GENERAL ASSEMBLY, April 21, 1777," (Providence: John Carter, 1777), Early American Imprints.

## Other Clergy Exemptions

In reaffirming the exemption for militia service due to conscience in 1756, in preparation for “a large body of French troops” heading toward English settlements, the General Assembly included a new exemption previously unseen in the records. “Ministers of the gospel,” simply put with no further specificity, were also included in the list of persons exempted. The motivation behind this might be gleaned from the others also not obligated to serve. Also listed were certain members of government, from high-ranking offices like the governor, justices of courts, and the treasurer, all the way down to town clerks and members of town councils.<sup>89</sup> This indicates that a motivating factor in exempting “ministers of the gospel” may have been continuity of public life. Not only did the civil government need to remain functional, but also the colony’s churches. Keeping churches running smoothly meant that, in a time of war, civilians had access to their usual means of community and spiritual support.

This is further supported by an exemption for “serving as a juror” in 1752. “The office of governor, deputy governor, assistant, secretary, attorney general, general treasurer,” judges “of the superior court of judicature, and of the inferior court of common pleas,” “clerks and sheriffs of each county” and their deputies, justices of the peace, and physicians, were all exempted from jury service, including “ministers of congregations of every denomination.”<sup>90</sup> Again, the priority appears to have been exempting those whose absence might jeopardize governance and everyday life.

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<sup>89</sup> *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, Vol. V, p. 535.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357.

However, tax exemptions complicate this rationale. In 1769, the General Assembly introduced a poll-tax exemption for “settled ministers of the Gospel.”<sup>91</sup> The exemption was reiterated in 1781.<sup>92</sup> While it might seem like a straightforward explanation that it would be needlessly disruptive to take ministers away from their churches for militia or jury service, what purpose did a tax exemption serve? As evidenced by churches approaching the General Assembly to establish lotteries to raise contributions to support ministers, discussed previously in this chapter, the Assembly members knew that most churches in the colony struggled to raise sufficient salaries. Authorizing those lotteries, and giving ministers a tax break, were ways that the civil government could do everything in its power to support churches and ministers without directly financially supporting them.

But not all ministers. The word “settled” does a great deal of work in these poll-tax exemptions. Many Rhode Island churches did not support permanent ministers, but hosted itinerant, temporary ministers as availability and their funds allowed. The tax applied to all non-exempted men over twenty-one who were “inhabitants” of the colony, a status that included those who were not freemen, or citizens, but lawfully resided in the colony, meaning that an itinerant minister visiting for a significant length of time could be subject to the tax. The synagogue constructed in Newport in 1763 never had a permanent rabbi in the colonial era, relying on itinerant rabbis from far-flung corners of the Atlantic and Mediterranean world.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, the terminology of “ministers of

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<sup>91</sup> *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, Vol. VI, p. 2.

<sup>92</sup> “In General Assembly, May Second Session, 1781.”

<sup>93</sup> See Arthur A. Chiel, “The Rabbis and Ezra Stiles,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 61, No. 4 (June 1972): 294-312; Laura Liebman, “From Holy Land to New England Canaan: Rabbi Haim Carigal and Sephardic Itinerant Preaching in the Eighteenth Century,” *Early American Literature* 44, No. 9 (2009):71-93.

the Gospel” in both the military and tax exemption necessarily excluded them, as the Gospels are exclusive to Christianity. For the jury exemption, the question of their application to a rabbi rather than a Protestant minister was rendered moot by the fact that none of the rabbis were permanent residents eligible to serve on a jury, and so the limits of the jury exemption for “ministers of congregations of every denomination” were never tested. But like an itinerant Protestant minister, an itinerant rabbi, not a “settled” clergy member, was not exempt from the poll tax.

Could a rabbi in colonial Rhode Island have benefited from the jury exemption, which applied to “every congregation,” wording not exclusive to Christianity, if only he were a permanent rabbi? Although it is impossible to know the outcome of this counterfactual situation, because Jewish Rhode Islanders struggled to attain freeman status, it would have been unlikely for a Jewish person to qualify for jury service in the first place. Although “Newport’s Jews enjoyed freedom of worship, abundant economic opportunities, and the right to live and work freely... they continued to face political discrimination in such areas as voting and office holding.”<sup>94</sup> The General Court denied citizenship to Jewish merchants Aaron Lopez and Isaac Elizer in 1762, ruling that, although Lopez and Elizer were otherwise in compliance with the British Naturalization Act of 1740, that Rhode Island citizenship could only be granted to Protestants. The court wrote:

...by the charter granted to this Colony, it appears that the free and quiet  
*enjoyment of the Christian religion and a desire of propagating the same,*

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<sup>94</sup> Ellen Smith and George M. Goodwin, eds., *The Jews of Rhode Island* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2004), p. 3.



*were the principle views with which this colony was settled... This court therefore unanimously dismiss this petition as wholly inconsistent with the first principles upon which the Colony was founded.*<sup>95</sup>

Lopez then became a naturalized citizen in Massachusetts, Elizer in New York. Because they could not attain freeman status, Jewish Rhode Islanders could neither vote nor hold public office—nor serve on a jury. At the same time, the General Assembly appointed Lopez to a committee on fishing rights in 1773, indicating some fluidity in the concept of citizenship.<sup>96</sup> The complicated legal situation of the Jewish community in colonial Rhode Island highlights that the colony’s purely “civil” government with protections for freedom of conscience did not necessarily mean that religious minorities enjoyed all the same civil liberties as their European Protestant counterparts.

### **Rhode Island Law in Print**

Prior to the eighteenth century, Rhode Island’s seventeenth-century laws and founding documents were relatively inaccessible, and a comprehensive framework for understanding them did not yet exist. As these laws and founding documents began to appear in print, the narrative of Rhode Island’s legal history as having a foundation of radical religious freedom took shape. However, eighteenth-century constructions—and

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<sup>95</sup> Gerber, p. 472. William Pencak wrote of Lopez’s case, “When Lopez appealed to the colony’s superior court, it sided with the assembly, stating the naturalization law was for ‘increasing the number of inhabitants in the plantations, but this colony being already so full of people that many of his majesty’s good subjects . . . had removed,’ there was no need to naturalize more people. Opposition to Lopez may have been anti-Semitic, or it may simply have reflected the fact that the house was dominated by rural farmers and residents of democratic Providence, who would not have taken kindly to Lopez’s votes with the more aristocratic merchants of Newport.” William Pencak, “Anti-Semitism, Toleration, and Appreciation: The Changing Relations of Jews and Gentiles in Early America” in Chris Beneke and Christopher S. Grenda, eds., *The First Prejudice: Religious Tolerance and Intolerance in Early America* (Penn, 2010), p. 248. Pencak’s reasons for excluding the explicitly religious language of the court’s decision is as surprising as it is confusing.

<sup>96</sup> Stanley F. Chyet, *Lopez of Newport: Colonial American Merchant Prince* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), p. 127.

omissions—continue to influence historiography even though historians have since gained better access to a more complete picture of Rhode Island’s early legal history.

In 1719, roughly a decade before James and Ann Franklin brought the colony’s first printing press to Newport, Boston printer John Allen printed both Rhode Island’s Royal Charter granted by Charles II and a comprehensive volume of Rhode Island law beginning with the charter.<sup>97</sup> These were printed for a Nicholas Boone, who had many items printed at Allen’s shop in Boston in the early eighteenth century before the Franklins’ arrival, and presumably sold them in Newport or Providence. The comprehensive volume excluded the Parliamentary Patent—a dead letter, useful to historians, but not to a practicing lawyer or official, suggesting that the volume was intended as contemporary reference material for practical purposes, not to preserve Rhode Island legal history for posterity. That the charter received its own separate printing in addition to inclusion in the larger volume suggests that, far from being ornamental or symbolic, the charter was frequently consulted in its particulars. This is further evident in the annotations that Boone decided to include, adding marginal notes as to the meaning or significance of specific passages. Those that protect “liberty of conscience” are labeled as such. The Charter never used the phrase, but this indicates that eighteenth-century Rhode Island colonists understood the wordy passages to communicate that concise maxim. Although freedom of worship is also protected, Boone did not highlight it. This might suggest that early Rhode Islanders considered it one in the same with liberty of conscience, at least in terms of practical application.

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<sup>97</sup> *The Charter Granted by His Majesty King Charles the Second, to the colony of Rhode-Island, and Providence-Plantations in America* (Boston: John Allen for Nicholas Boone, 1719); *Acts and Laws of His Majesties Colony of Rhode-Island, and Providence Plantations in America* (Boston: John Allen for Nicholas Boone, 1719). Early American Imprints database.

After the Franklins set up shop in Newport in 1727, they printed a copy of the Royal Charter in 1730.<sup>98</sup> Although they kept many of the same annotations as Boone, they removed the annotations signaling which passages protected liberty of conscience. Instead, the annotations are mostly focused on more rote aspects of the charter. Although only published eleven years after Boone's publication, this omission may indicate changing attitudes toward the Charter's religious protections. Perhaps liberty of conscience was such a foregone conclusion that its protection did not merit annotation. Perhaps, as Syndey James argued about the situation more generally, Rhode Islanders were shy to acknowledge law related to religious liberty given how murky the legal situation vis-a-vis churches and colonial government were. The Franklins continued to publish laws passed by the General Assembly when they met, usually verbatim with no apparent editorializing, again suggesting the utilitarian nature of these documents. After James Franklin's death, Ann continued to publish laws passed by the General Assembly, and even reprinted the charter.<sup>99</sup>

These early publications that excluded the Parliamentary Patent and the earliest General Assembly laws before the Royal Charter may have contributed to the historiographical problem of framing Rhode Island as founded with explicit legal religious protections. Rhode Island legal history in relation to religion looks much clearer

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<sup>98</sup> *The Charter Granted by His Majesty King Charles the Second, to the Colony of Rhode Island, and Providence-Plantations, in America* (Newport: James Franklin, 1730). Although James Franklin was named as the sole printer until his death, when Ann carried on the business under her name, most historians acknowledge that they worked together to the extent that it is accurate to refer to both James and Ann as co-printers, and narrate their Newport career accordingly. I defer to this historiographical convention in this dissertation. For further biographical information, see James N. Green, "English Books and Printing in the Age of Franklin" in Hugh Amory and David Hall, eds., *A History of the Book in America, Vol. I: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill: UNC for the American Antiquarian Society, 2007), pp. 248-9.

<sup>99</sup> *The Charter Granted by His Majesty King Charles the Second, to the Colony of Rhode Island, and Providence-Plantations, in America* (Newport: Ann Franklin, 1745).

and focused when one begins with the charter and moves forward in time from there. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw the publication of Rhode Island legal documents before the charter, but by then, scholars had already made up their mind about Rhode Island's heritage, solidified in the writing of nineteenth-century historians. Twentieth-century historians played catch up, incorporating older laws into their analysis, but still largely neglected to reform the master narrative.

### **Transition from Colony to State**

Rhode Island impressively maintained consistency of its legal structure in its transition from colony to state. The state did not adopt a new state constitution until 1844, instead maintaining its 1663 Royal Charter and changing the power from the king to the state. Legal historian D. Kurt Graham highlights that Rhode Islanders resisted the federal judiciary in the early national period because of Rhode Island's initial resistance to ratifying the constitution, both stemming from Rhode Island's obsession with local autonomy. He argues that this tradition in Rhode Island sprang out of its liberty of conscience and heritage as a religiously diverse colony.<sup>100</sup> Patrick T. Conley similarly argues that Rhode Island's "long tradition of individualism, separatism, democracy, and liberty both civil and religious" influenced its "long-standing distrust of government too far removed from the people."<sup>101</sup> Anti-Federalism in Rhode Island became especially popular in more rural areas outside of Providence and Newport.

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<sup>100</sup> D. Kurt Graham, *To Bring Law Home: The Federal Judiciary in Early National Rhode Island* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), pp. 16-21.

<sup>101</sup> Patrick T. Conley, *Democracy in Decline: Rhode Island's Constitutional Development, 1776-1841* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1977), p. 121.

Revolutionary Rhode Island law reflected that, even if one considers it the center of gravity for religious liberty during much of the colonial era, that center of gravity was shifting South. While meeting to ratify the constitution, Rhode Island ratified its own Declaration of Rights of the People of Rhode Island that appeared nearly identical to those passed in Virginia, including religious freedom protections. The 18th resolution of the Rhode Island Declaration restored religious exemptions for military service, but stipulated that those exempted were responsible for “payment of an equivalent to employ another to bear arms in his stead,” in language lifted verbatim from the Virginia Declaration’s 19th resolution. The 4th resolution guaranteed the “free exercise of religion,” a word-for-word copy of Virginia’s 20th.<sup>102</sup> Because Virginia had taken the lead in influencing the conversation about religious liberty in Revolutionary America and the early republic, and because Rhode Island’s charter already protected freedom of conscience and the secular civil government, it naturally follows that the convention in Rhode Island would not see the need to adopt unique language regarding the “free exercise of religion.” That Virginia kept existing fines for religious exemption for military service already in place during the colonial era is not surprising, but it is surprising that the Rhode Island convention was willing to adopt fines for religious exemption when throughout most of its colonial history, those exempted were only responsible for fines if they did not meet other provisos. However, considering that the exemptions had been suspended altogether during the war, such a resolution was an improvement on the alternative.

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<sup>102</sup> Kevin D. Leitaio, “Rhode Island’s Forgotten Bill of Rights,” *Roger Williams University Law Review*, Vol. 1, No. 31, pp. 31-61.

## Conclusion

In February of 1784, the General Assembly passed a gradual emancipation law in order to bring an end to slavery in Rhode Island. All children born to enslaved mothers after March 1<sup>st</sup> of that year would be free. Initially, support for these children fell on towns, but the next year, the Assembly ruled that the white person who enslaved the child's mother would be responsible for financially supporting the child into adulthood. "It is the Desire of this Assembly, that all such as are freed by this Act, be educated in the Principles of the Christian Religion, and instructed in Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic."<sup>103</sup> By the late eighteenth century, many Rhode Islanders championed a definition of religious liberty that advocated for the liberty of religion to influence the civil government to the greatest extent possible, covered in greater detail in chapter five. This provision seems to fit squarely with that trajectory in the intellectual and legal history of the concept of freedom of religion in the early United States and represents a change from colonial era understandings in Rhode Island. Yet Roger Williams himself advocated for the influence of Protestant theology in civil government, indicating that little had changed in the past century and a half.

Early colonial Rhode Island followed a pattern sweeping the entire English Atlantic to increase the separation of civil and ecclesiastical government, taking it a step further in removing an ecclesiastical arm to the government altogether. But the history of legal religious liberty in Rhode Island and the United States demonstrates the limits to a complete separation of religion and government. Rhode Island law, and United States

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<sup>103</sup> Gabriel Loiacono, "Poor Laws and the Construction of Race in Early Republican Providence, Rhode Island," *The Journal of Policy History*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2013), pp. 264-287.

law, were both forged in Protestant theology, regardless of their complete bureaucratic separation from a specific denomination. Over the past two centuries, laws steeped in religious tradition have only been chipped away at that no longer represent widespread consensus, but chipping away at a Protestant foundation for the law does not fundamentally transform that foundation.

The expectation that colonial Rhode Island could have been established without a legal system undergirded by a broad Protestant synthesis is perhaps an unreasonable one; Rhode Island simply crafted its civil laws as most places in the early modern English Atlantic did. That is precisely the point. Movements to maintain separation between civil and ecclesiastical powers, and movements toward universal freedom of conscience, were both popular in colonial Rhode Island's time and place, even in places typically labeled theocracies like Massachusetts Bay. Only by mostly eliminating government funding for the ecclesiastical side could Rhode Island boast any claim to radicalism, and the ramifications of that step have been exaggerated. The relationship between religion and civil government in Rhode Island was not non-existent; it was complicated.

**Chapter II**  
**Roger Williams' Civility Controversy and Anne Hutchinson as Rhode Island**  
**Founder:**  
**A Lively Historiographical Experiment**

In the Massachusetts Bay colony during the mid-1630s, a devout puritan colonist began to express beliefs that, though firmly rooted in widely accepted puritan theology, provoked concern among ministers and magistrates due to their perceived extremity and, perhaps more significantly, the perceived incivility of their expression. At first, the ministers and magistrates tried to handle the disruptive expression of this colonist's radical views quietly. When this approach failed, the disagreements made their way before the General Court—several times. With each wave of court appearances, the opportunity for consensus and reconciliation deteriorated. This radical puritan not only refused to back down from extreme beliefs and expressing them in unacceptable ways, but hosted meetings of likeminded friends and admirers at home. This individual gained substantial support from both women and men, which especially infuriated many Massachusetts Bay elites. The church that the leader belonged to, and then the colony, resorted to banishment. Eventually, this colonist brokered an agreement with the Narragansett to create an English settlement south of the bounds of the Massachusetts Bay colony. I am referring, of course, to Roger Williams.

Although both Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams were embroiled in strikingly similar Massachusetts Bay controversies that both resulted in English settlement along Narragansett Bay—first Williams, from 1631 to 1636, then Hutchinson, from 1636 to 1638—historians do not typically narrate the banishments of Williams and Hutchinson in ways that draw parallels between the two. Historians consistently treat Roger Williams' controversy in, and banishment from, Massachusetts Bay as merely a prologue to his time



in Rhode Island.<sup>104</sup> In contrast, historians typically frame Hutchinson's antinomian—or free grace—controversy as a contained event with a clear beginning and end within Massachusetts, with her time in Rhode Island acting as a narrative epilogue that does not merit serious consideration. Rhode Island was the inevitable place for a banished Massachusetts radical and her followers to go—end of story. Chronologically, this is sensible; Williams spent nearly fifty years shepherding his “lively experiment,” while Hutchinson spent only a few years in Rhode Island. However, these framings obscure some aspects of Williams' controversy and Hutchinson's exile that allow us to better understand early English settlement along Narragansett Bay and the English Atlantic world it inhabited.

What insights surface when we flip the script on these two central figures of early English colonial Rhode Island? What can historians glean from treating Williams' controversy in Massachusetts Bay, and Hutchinson's settlement in Rhode Island, on their own terms? Having the usual stories of Williams and Hutchinson borrow narrative conventions from each other productively benefits our understanding of both individuals' persecution in Massachusetts Bay and subsequent settlement in Rhode Island in ways that the conventional narratives obscure. Treating Williams' persecution in Massachusetts as a discrete event improves the clarity of the stakes of Williams' disagreements with Massachusetts Bay authorities, which subsequently offers greater clarity into Williams' vision for the Providence Plantations settlement. Focusing on Hutchinson's settlement on

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<sup>104</sup> This appears to be a more recent historiographical trend. In the 1970s, Sydney James wrote, “Discussion of Roger Williams... has been carried on in terms that keep drawing historians back to evaluating his relations with magistrates and ministers in Massachusetts to the exclusion of attention to his life in Rhode Island.” (James, *Rhode Island: A History* (New York: Scribner, 1975), pp. xvi-xvii). Given James' observation, it seems that historians have swung too far in the other direction since.

Aquidneck Island—called Rhode Island at the time—adds greater specificity to her and her followers’ intentions for the settlement. Both narrative interventions complicate the role of liberty of conscience in the founding of, and intentions for, English colonial Rhode Island.

Williams’ banishment resulted from a five-year long conflict that began almost as soon as he arrived from England in 1631. It started with disagreement over whether to reform or separate from the Church of England, then laws regarding the sabbath, then whether church governance should be independent or “Presbyterian,” then the legitimacy of English land claims in the charter vis-a-vis Native sovereignty, then the conflation of civil and ecclesiastical government, then requirements for oaths to the colony and Crown that included reference to Christianity, then separatism again. Throughout most of the conflict, the legal and socially acceptable ways to express such opinions made up the consistent refrain. Although in the aftermath of the controversy, Williams maintained that Massachusetts infringed on his liberty of conscience, his Massachusetts critics argued that at issue were not his sincerely held beliefs themselves, but his manner of expressing them. Those instrumental in his banishment contended that they were reasonable, tolerant people, but Williams went out of his way to stir conflict when he could have expressed his positions in ways that were not disruptive to the community.

Using the reasoning that Michael Winship employed in deciding upon the naming of the free grace controversy for Hutchinson’s ordeal, in this chapter, I call the controversy involving Roger Williams the “civility controversy.” In deciding upon the term “free grace controversy,” Winship attempts to pin down a term that describes the heart of the controversy from a non-partisan perspective. “Antinomian,” or the more

common insult hurled at Hutchinson and her followers during the conflict, “familist,” are not, he contends, accurate to how they understood themselves. Hutchinson and her followers were not antinomians; that is, they did not believe, or at least would not fully admit to believing, that free grace completely, unilaterally excused them from obeying Biblical law. To some extent, her Massachusetts critics understood that; the charge was that the logical extent of their expressed beliefs could be understood to amount to true antinomianism. But neither side would disagree that the exact nature of God’s free grace and its relationship to living day-to-day as a Christian was the root of the conflict.<sup>105</sup>

While there were many distinct issues at stake for Williams and Massachusetts Bay, labeling the conflict the “civility controversy” best matches Winship’s methodology for naming the free grace controversy. Calling it the “charter controversy,” the “separatist controversy,” or the “oath controversy” would be a disservice to each point of contention because Williams and his critics both expressed that Williams’ positions on these issues were ancillary to their fundamental disagreements over what constituted civility or, in later writings, liberty of conscience. In treating Williams as a case study alongside Hutchinson and others, Timothy Wood, one of the few historians to treat Williams’ persecution in Massachusetts on its own terms, frames it as a controversy primarily concerning liberty of conscience.<sup>106</sup> Although the same non-partisan logic of labeling it the “civility controversy” could be applied to calling it the “liberty of conscience controversy”—in other words, that what each side believed about it was less important

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<sup>105</sup> Michael Winship introduced the label “free grace controversy” in *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636-1641* (Princeton, 2002). The term “antinomian controversy,” he argues, “is a misleading nineteenth-century simplification...” Using the term “free grace controversy” instead “seems both descriptively accurate and prejudicial to none of the actors.”

<sup>106</sup> Timothy L. Wood, *Agents of Wrath, Sowers of Discord: Authority and Dissent in Puritan Massachusetts, 1630-1655* (New York: Routledge, 2006). In addition to Williams and Hutchinson, Wood also includes the controversies of George Philips in 1631-2 and Henry Dunster in 1640.

than its consistent invocation—liberty of conscience was not as consistently invoked during the controversy as the issue of civility. Similar to Jonathan Beecher Field’s argument that print culture played a role in “creating” the free grace controversy, both Williams and his critics invoked the issue of liberty of conscience more consistently in print culture following the controversy than in the midst of it.<sup>107</sup>

My intention is not to take the tactics that Massachusetts elites weaponized in Williams’ persecution at face value; indeed, several instances in the archive reveal inconsistencies in their approach that suggest disingenuousness, especially as the controversy accelerated toward its conclusion. When one considers that, had Williams’ positions been common and widely accepted in the colony, the limits to his expression would have been few but his own resources, the entire house of cards falls down. However, my intention is to analyze these rhetorical methods in order to demonstrate their influence on Williams’ opinions on civility and liberty of conscience articulated after the controversy.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Jonathan Beecher Field, “The Antinomian Controversy Did Not Take Place,” *Early American Studies* 6, No. 2 (Fall 2008): 448-463. Beecher Field argues that the framing of the controversy as a discrete event, with a clear beginning and end, emerged later in print culture in order to both defend and criticize the New England Way. Sydney James also addressed this issue, writing that in his “pamphlet battle” with John Cotton, “by that time Williams had modified his position, and circumstances had changed so as to make both writers dwell almost exclusively on the question of religious freedom.” James, *Colonial Rhode Island: A History* (New York: Scribner, 1975), p. 16.

<sup>108</sup> In *Congregational Communion: Clerical Friendship in the Anglo-American Puritan Community, 1610-1692* (Northeastern, 1994), Francis Bremer writes that while the Massachusetts position “was not as liberal as twentieth-century sensibilities would wish, it was not as intolerant as Williams wished to portray it” (p. 159). I think this statement gets the problem backwards. In my opinion, even if one disagrees with Williams’ arguments against his Massachusetts critics, he cannot be said to have been dishonest or unfair to exactly what they said and did. As for the first half of the statement, while fair to say that even taking Massachusetts puritans’ arguments for their own toleration entirely at face value would fall short of late twentieth and early twenty-first century ideals, the more pressing problem with historiography and memory of Massachusetts puritans’ persecution of dissidents is that it continues to be portrayed as cartoonishly ham-fisted. This is not to say that examining their defense of their own toleration improves their image; on the contrary, I believe that many twenty-first century readers would see the rhetorical methods they employed—which arguably amounted to what we would now call gaslighting—as much more sinister than what the typical portrayal of puritans suggests. Jane Kamensky also takes a position on what was truly at stake in *Governing the Tongue: The Politics of Speech in Early New England* (Oxford, 1998), arguing that “in itself, this [Williams’ beliefs] implied no breach of the rules of right speaking; as a minister, Williams was expected (even paid) to unfold his opinions. The problem was that... his beliefs were at odds with those of the

Focusing on the civility controversy allows us to see how Williams formulated his specific definition of civility as a result of it, which he subsequently applied to his hopes for Providence Plantations, and later all of what came to be known as Rhode Island.

Teresa Bejan’s work productively distinguishes between a twenty-first-century concept of civility—that is, synonymous with niceness, politeness, and respectfulness; the concept of civility held by most Massachusetts puritans—which included restrained politeness but also included outward signs of conformity such as proper English dress and speech, especially in reference to the perceived incivility of Native Americans that fueled New England Indian “praying towns”; and Williams’ concept of civility—the absence of official, government-sanctioned punishment for deviations of verbally expressed opinions, even if that expression, or responses to it, were aggressive and rude.<sup>109</sup> In Williams’ framework, shouting down or insulting those one disagreed with was not uncivil, but fining, executing, banishing, or incarcerating them for their opinions was. Bejan’s work is a critical intervention in misleading portrayals of Williams’ civil dialogue with those he disagreed with, which rest on the assumption that civil dialogue meant polite, respectful, calm theological debate that never descended into the emotional or the

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nascent Massachusetts orthodoxy” (p. 67). While agreeing with Kamensky, I aim to place greater emphasis on the narrative that Williams’ critics constructed in order to deflect this.

<sup>109</sup> How Massachusetts Bay puritans conceptualized civility is also covered in Richard P. Gildrie, *The Profane, the Civil, & the Godly: The Reformation of Manners in Orthodox New England, 1679-1749* (Penn, 1994) and Kamensky’s *Governing the Tongue*. Gildrie begins his study with Reforming Synod of 1679, which focused on outward behavior such as “gambling, drunkenness, violence, and adultery” and argues that puritans distinguished between the “civil,” which encompassed outward behavior in accordance with puritan norms for the benefit of the community, the “godly,” which encompassed one’s internal accordance with puritan theology, and the “profane,” which was an external expression of internal ungodliness. Gildrie sees this formulation as a backlash against the perceived individualism of controversial figures such as the “antinomians.” Kamensky’s work pushes the chronology of this formulation earlier, in the 1630s and 40s, in large part as a result of what happened with Hutchinson and Williams. Kristin A. Olbertson also argues for the same chronology and causation as Kamensky in *The Dreadful Word: Speech Crime and Polite Gentlemen in Massachusetts, 1690-1776* (Cambridge, 2022). I would argue that the controversies of William and Hutchinson—as well as the controversies Timothy Wood groups them with, those of George Philips and Henry Dunster—suggest that those dynamics seem to have already been in nascent construction in those controversies rather than created as a direct result of them.

personal, portrayals at odds with what he wrote about civility and what we know about how he argued with those he disagreed with theologically. Bejan attributes Williams' formulation of his concept of civility to sixteenth and early seventeenth-century writers on the topic as well as to his experience living with the Narragansett immediately after his exile from Massachusetts.<sup>110</sup> I build upon Bejan's work by placing greater emphasis on the role of his experience in Massachusetts before his exile in the formation of his ideas.

Williams' articulation of civility that resulted from his persecution played a significant role in setting the cultural groundwork for an overwhelmingly puritan and Baptist seventeenth-century Rhode Island in which other marginalized religious groups that the majority disagreed with could freely be made to feel unwelcome, even bullied and harassed—but not in an official capacity by the colonial government. No one could lawfully face physical violence or, as Williams described his banishment, be denied “common earth and aire” as a direct result of their religious beliefs or practices.<sup>111</sup> However, unlike the 1682 Great Law of Pennsylvania, known for enshrining religious liberty in the colony and which prohibited verbal defamation on the basis of religion, in Rhode Island, Williams encouraged exchanges that could land one before the court in

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<sup>110</sup> Teresa Bejan's work on Roger Williams' conceptions of civility can be found in “‘The Bond of Civility’: Roger Williams on Toleration and its Limits,” *History of European Ideas* 37 (2011): 409-420 and *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Harvard, 2017). In *Mere Civility*, Bejan compares Williams' conception of civility to those of Hobbes and Locke, wherein Hobbes emphasized avoiding topics of disagreement and Locke emphasized downplaying the importance of points of disagreement to neutralize the need for aggressive or rude expression. Bejan does call attention to the fact that Williams did, in a few instances, write that he considered “courteousness” to be part of civility, which seems at odds with most of his writing and actions. However, she points out that his use of the term “courteous” refers to respect for one's rank or position, rather than as a synonym for “nice.”

<sup>111</sup> *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, Vol. I (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), p. 326.

Pennsylvania.<sup>112</sup> In this way, Williams' conception of civility fostered the cultivation of a Rhode Island landscape in which one, or a small group of, dominant denominations maintained cultural and political hegemony even in the absence of an ecclesiastical form of government. This serves the central argument of the dissertation that early Rhode Island history demonstrates that the forces necessary to maintain Protestant hegemony in early America in the absence of an established church existed in the seventeenth-century English Atlantic, two centuries earlier than most historians of early American religion argue. While chapter three analyzes the specifics of how these dynamics played out in religious conflict in early Rhode Island, this chapter analyzes the role of the civility controversy in forming them.

Furthermore, it matters to our understanding of Massachusetts Bay, Rhode Island, colonial New England, early America, and the early modern Atlantic that those who persecuted Williams and Hutchinson in Massachusetts felt that such a defense of their own toleration and moderation was necessary. The kind of persecution that Massachusetts was engaged in during the seventeenth century was not universally considered acceptable in the early modern English Atlantic at this time, even to themselves, without rigorous rhetorical gymnastics.<sup>113</sup> In addition to a growing chorus of voices for religious toleration, the seventeenth-century Atlantic was crowded with those who could

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<sup>112</sup> This provision of the Great Law is cited in Bejan, p. 46. As chapter 1 of this dissertation demonstrates, much of Rhode Island law did place nebulous boundaries around religious liberty as far as "civility and order" would allow. However, not all of these laws were necessarily written with Williams' precise definition of civility in mind. Apart from his role in drafting founding documents, Williams had a very limited influence on Rhode Island law as an individual. The only office he held in the Rhode Island colonial government was "president" for a brief period in the 1650s.

<sup>113</sup> Bejan outlines Williams' sixteenth and seventeenth-century print culture influences on Williams in chapter 2 of *Mere Civility*. Considering that Williams was himself a puritan, it is very likely that many of his critics were familiar with at least some of the same works. Winthrop's 1645 "Little Speech on Liberty," though coming to conclusions at odds with Williams, suggests immersion in similar literature.

potentially claim martyrdom status, which prompted puritans to exert significant effort in putting boundaries around claims of martyrdom and persecution.<sup>114</sup> In turn, this highlights that Williams' opinions about toleration did not come out of thin air as a result of his singular genius.

This chapter focuses on John Winthrop's journal during the civility controversy, interspersed with extant correspondence contemporaneous with it.<sup>115</sup> Why privilege the voice of one of Williams' critics who bore responsibility for his banishment? The justifications for doing so stem from both Williams and Winthrop's relationship and the construction of the archive. Despite Winthrop's role in the controversy, Winthrop and Williams considered each other dear friends before, during, and, indeed, after Williams fled Massachusetts. Williams maintained his friendship with Winthrop until Winthrop's death in 1649 and with his son for decades after, evident in their respective bodies of correspondence. In other words, we can trust Winthrop to have been as fair to Williams as anyone. At the same time, privileging a singular voice, even a vetted one, has the

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<sup>114</sup> Adrian Weimer analyzes how definitions of martyrdom in colonial New England were influenced by early modern European religious conflict after the Protestant Reformation in *Martyrs' Mirror: Persecution and Holiness in Early New England* (Oxford, 2011). Weimer argues that, fashioning themselves as persecuted minorities of mainstream Anglicanism, New England puritans cast dissenters as persecutors of the true church. While Weimer argues that those with heterodox views in colonial New England were framed as persecutors, what comes to light in the ordeals of Williams and Hutchinson, Williams especially, was that they were not solely viewed as aggressive antagonists, but also as something more passive, as people whose concerns could be dismissed as amounting to foolish overreaction. Weimer also highlights how creating Massachusetts as a puritan colony made it difficult for puritans whose theology did not conflict with that prevailing in the colony to continue justifying their persecuted status, as have Timothy Wood in *Agents of Wrath, Sowers of Discord* and Michael Winship in *Making Heretics*.

<sup>115</sup> Versions of Winthrop's journal consulted for this chapter include *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630-1649* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), J. Franklin Jameson, ed., *Winthrop's Journal, 1630-1649* (New York: Scribner for the American Historical Association, 1908) and excerpts from his journal in Theodore P. Green, ed., *Roger Williams and the Massachusetts Magistrates* (Boston: Heath, 1964). All three versions were consulted because the first is an abridged version, the second is a complete edition of the entire journal, and the third offers narrative framework through relevant selection of excerpts from Williams' controversy. As a collection of primary sources directly related to Williams' time in Massachusetts, *Roger Williams and the Massachusetts Magistrates* stands as one of the few attempts to contain Williams' Massachusetts controversy as an event on its own terms. However, in its editorial selection, at least one key journal entry is left out—An October 1632 visit by Winthrop to Plymouth, which included conversations with Williams.



potential to dangerously obscure features of the controversy that other voices would illuminate. However, Winthrop's journal is the most comprehensive perspective recorded during the controversy that survives, making it critical to analyzing the stakes of the conflict as all parties saw it at the time.<sup>116</sup> Winthrop's journal accomplishes more than simply offering conveniently concise summary of the court proceedings and other events of the controversy; Winthrop's narrative choices—what he included, what he excluded, and what connections he drew—represent the only extant primary source of an individual involved in the ordeal constructing a cohesive narrative of it in real time. This narrative construction of the controversy in the midst of it demonstrates a consistent privileging of the civility issue, with most theological and political disagreements between Williams and the court relating back to civility.

Hutchinson's time in Rhode Island was almost as short as Williams' time in Massachusetts, arriving in 1638 and leaving in 1642. While Hutchinson was still battling the General Court in Massachusetts in late 1637, many of the "antinomians" in her orbit were already banished and established the town of Exeter in the Province of New Hampshire. Roger Williams encouraged the others to negotiate the purchase of Aquidneck Island from the Narragansett. There they established Portsmouth, an explicitly puritan settlement that some historians contend went further than Massachusetts Bay in intertwining religion and government. Hutchinson and her family were among the original settlers; her husband signed the Portsmouth Compact along with twenty-two

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<sup>116</sup> In addition to Winthrop's journal and correspondence cited in this chapter, another source directly contemporary to the controversy is the Massachusetts General Court records from 1631-6. While Winthrop's journal summarizes the court proceedings and constructs a narrative that has value to scholars beyond mere summary and deserves analysis on its own, analysis that directly compares the General Court records and Winthrop's journal would undoubtedly offer more clarity on Winthrop's narrative construction. Although a letter from the Salem church signed by Williams and others is included in *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*, the early records of the Salem church do not include any reference to Roger Williams.

other men. Members of the Boston church visited her and other exiles of the free grace controversy with the intention of convincing them to humbly admit their errors and return. Of all the settlers that members of the Boston church visited, Hutchinson was perhaps the most reluctant to entertain any notion of reconciliation. Hutchinson and her children, excluding her adult daughter who eventually returned to Massachusetts, left Portsmouth in 1642 following the death of her husband, possibly in part due to fears that they were not far enough out of the reach of Massachusetts puritans' attempts to bring them back. They fled to New Netherland near present-day Rye, New York, the Dutch having given safe haven to English puritans before. They were killed in a Siwanoy raid the following year.

Hutchinson's time in Rhode Island, like Williams' time in Massachusetts, also prompts us to reassess the significance of an established church in puritan hegemony. The early settlements at Portsmouth and Newport drew more criticism from Massachusetts figures like John Winthrop than Providence even though they did not attempt to establish "democracie" and liberty of conscience at the start as Providence did. As covered at greater length in the first chapter of this dissertation, Portsmouth's founding documents make clear that they did not share Williams' aims to create a government that dealt "only in civil things."<sup>117</sup> J. Stanley Lemons contends that "The Portsmouth Compact established a theocratic government, not a church" and quotes Raymond D. Irwin's position that they "established a true theocracy in Rhode Island, one that went even further than Massachusetts did in regulating society by Scripture." While Massachusetts Bay claimed to attempt to keep its arms of religious and civil governance separate—

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<sup>117</sup> Providence Civil Compact, 1637, City Archives, Providence, RI.

though much spillover took place in practice, to say the very least—Portsmouth entertained no such pretense, with religious “Elders” who ruled directly under a judge “modeled on the ancient Hebrew one.”<sup>118</sup> This shows that Hutchinson and other exiles of the free grace controversy did not immediately come to conclusions about the need for a “wall of separation”—a term which Williams used a century and a half before Thomas Jefferson—between religion and government as a result of the free grace controversy.<sup>119</sup> The implications of this call into question some longstanding historiographical assumptions about early Rhode Island’s reputation. Winthrop’s criticism of Rhode Island as the “Island of Errors” was directed *literally* at Rhode Island—that is, Portsmouth and Newport on Aquidneck Island—not Williams’ Providence Plantations, even though the nickname continues to have a strong association with Williams in historiography and popular memory.<sup>120</sup> This suggests that Winthrop did not assess a lack of an established church as the greatest threat to puritan New England.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> J. Stanley Lemons, *Retracing Baptists in Rhode Island: Identity, Formation, and History* (Baylor, 2019), p. 21-22. The article by Raymond D. Irwin that he quotes is “Cast Out from the ‘City upon a Hill’: Antinomian Exiles in Rhode Island, 1638-1650,” *Rhode Island History* 52, no. 1 (1994):3-19. The precise definition of theocracy is contested. If we take Edmund Morgan’s argument that seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay was not a theocracy because clergy did not wield direct political power in that capacity, then that argument would also apply here (Morgan, *Roger Williams: The Church and the State* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) p. 63).

<sup>119</sup> Williams used the term “wall of separation” in *Mr. Cotton’s Letter Lately Printed, Examined and Answered* (London, 1644), the full phrase being: “the hedge or wall of Separation between the Garden of the Church and the Wildernes of the world...” p. 45. Bejan points out that it is possible that Williams acquired this phrase from Richard Hooker, who used it in Book 8, *Of Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. However, although Hooker published the first of these books in 1594, Book 8 was published posthumously in 1648, four years after *Mr. Cotton’s Letter*. It is possible that John Spenser, who edited Book 8 and was accused of changing significant portions of the text, took the phrase from Williams. As Hooker died three years before Williams’ birth and therefore the two never met, but *Mr. Cotton’s Letter* was popular during Spenser’s editing, the latter seems the likelier scenario (Bejan, p. 199, n2).

<sup>120</sup> Winthrop’s published assault on the Aquidneck Island settlements, the first edition titled *Antinomians and Familists Condemned by the Synod of Elders in New-England* (London: Ralph Smith, 1644), later retitled *A Short Story of the Rise, and Ruine of the Antinomians, Familists & Libertines* in subsequent editions, describes the island thus: the antinomians “went all together out of our jurisdiction and precinct into an Island, called Read-Iland, (surnamed by some, the Island of errors)...” David D. Hall, ed., *The Antinomian Controversy: A Documentary History, 1636-1638* (Duke, 1990), p. 218. The nickname “Isle of Errors” also appears in the anonymously written *Moro-Mastix: Mr John Goodwin Whipt with His Own Rod* (London: Thomas Underhill, 1647), p. 5.

<sup>121</sup> There are two important caveats to this. First, Winthrop did criticize Providence Plantations directly, writing, “at Providence... the devil is not idle” (cited in LeRoy Moore, Jr., “Roger Williams and the Historians,” *Church History*

Focusing exclusively on the aftermath of the free grace controversy in Rhode Island, we also see that similar tactics of deflecting claims to persecution were employed for Hutchinson and others involved in the free grace controversy. Ties between Massachusetts and the Hutchinson cohort were not cleanly and completely severed by their banishment. Members of the Boston church maintained relationships with those who relocated to Aquidneck Island and expected most of them to eventually return, Hutchinson included.<sup>122</sup> Indeed, some did, but Hutchinson and others firmly resisted Bostonians' overtures. This allows us to approach the tactics Massachusetts Bay used to banish dissidents with greater specificity. The Massachusetts Bay establishment did everything in its power to make it appear as though Hutchinson and others essentially banished themselves after every avenue that could possibly have been taken to bring them back into the fold, each of those avenues being reasonable and humane, was exhausted. Unlike the civility controversy, Massachusetts elites made their position very clear that the content of Hutchinson's theological positions mattered at least as much as how she chose to express them, both during and after the free grace controversy.<sup>123</sup> Yet for both, Winthrop and others spun a narrative in which either one of them fashioning themselves as a persecuted martyr was ridiculous. As with Williams, that they considered

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32, No. 4 (Dec. 1963): 435). Second, Winthrop's criticisms of Rhode Island were published *after* the 1641 decision to unify the island under one government as a "democracie" where "non be accounted Delinquent for Doctrine." However, Winthrop spends much more time criticizing their theology than their government.

<sup>122</sup> Between 1630 and 1649, Boston only had one church, which still exists today as a Unitarian Universalist congregation and is known as First Church in Boston. In this chapter, "the Boston church" refers to this church, similar to how contemporaries referred to it in the 1630s and 40s.

<sup>123</sup> Historians have long pointed to the role of misogyny in Anne Hutchinson's persecution, which can hardly be overstated. The most recent iteration of this argument is Marilyn J. Westerkamp's *The Passion of Anne Hutchinson: An Extraordinary Woman, the Puritan Patriarchs, and the World They Made and Lost* (Oxford, 2021). I believe that gender plays a significant role in the typical framing of Williams' story beginning in Rhode Island and Hutchinson's story as primarily about her persecution in Massachusetts. An exclusive focus on Williams' persecution in Massachusetts, and position as a victim, detracts from the heroic "Great Man" narrative.

this narrative spin necessary for Hutchinson indicates that they inhabited a cultural and intellectual environment in which outright, unapologetic persecution without any hedging or justification was unacceptable.

This chapter focuses on the account recorded in a journal belonging to Robert Keayne of a visit by members of the Boston church to exiles of the free grace controversy in Rhode Island in 1639. Keayne did not join them, but recorded the verbal accounts given by the three men who did—Edward Gibbons, William Hibbins, and John Oliver. Though frustratingly concise, this account serves as one of the only windows into the thoughts and feelings of those who fled to Rhode Island as a result of the controversy after they settled there and has received surprisingly little attention. This account highlights the position of the Boston church that they were flexible, tolerant, and moderate, and the exiles obstinate and unreasonably firm in their positions.

### **Civility in Winthrop's Journal**

Winthrop's reaction to Williams' arrival gave the first hint that separatist beliefs themselves were not inherently a cause for conflict absent other factors. In January of 1631, Roger Williams and his wife, Mary Barnard Williams, arrived in Nantasket on the ship *Lyon*.<sup>124</sup> Nantasket, in present-day Hull, Massachusetts, is a peninsula on which the Plymouth Colony established a trading post. Winthrop noted the arrival of "Mr. Williams, (a godly minister,) with his wife."<sup>125</sup> Of all the passengers of the *Lyon*, Winthrop would have been most interested in the arrival of another "godly," or puritan, minister in the region. That the Williamses arrived in the heavily separatist colony of Plymouth rather

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<sup>124</sup> By the Julian calendar convention, this was January 1630/31.

<sup>125</sup> J. Franklin Jameson, ed., *Winthrop's Journal, 1630-1649* (New York: Scribner for the American Historical Association, 1908), p. 57.

than Boston, the *Lyon's* next port of call, seemed of little consequence to Winthrop. At that moment, little tension existed between the Massachusetts Bay puritans who wished to reform or purify, but remain a part of, the Church of England and the mostly separatist Plymouth colony, this lack of tension especially made evident later in the journal. At this moment, before Williams' separatism became disruptive, English colonists in both colonies saw their positions more as differences of degree than of kind. Winthrop's predecessor, John Endecott, was himself a separatist. Winthrop was simply pleased that a "godly" minister arrived.

It only took three months for trouble to begin brewing. However, these first stirrings of trouble came not directly from Williams' opinions, but from a perceived breach of expected professional deference. Williams refused to accept a position at the Boston church, which declined to commit to full separation from the Church of England. Here it was noted that Williams also "declared his opinion, that the magistrate might not punish the breach of the Sabbath, or any other offence, as it was a breach of the first table," as he believed that the government did not have the authority to intervene in such breaches.<sup>126</sup> Importantly, Winthrop did not note either of these two concerns on their own. Winthrop only bothered to record these two issues in April 1631 when the Salem church recruited Williams "to the office of a teacher." Winthrop was of the opinion that because Williams declined the Boston church, the Salem church should have consulted with the General Court before approaching Williams for the position.<sup>127</sup> Granted, Williams only declined the Boston church due to his separatism, but it was still those inter-church

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<sup>126</sup> *Journal*, p. 61. In Christian theology, the first table refers to an individual's relationship with God (of the Ten Commandments, this includes commandments 1-4), whereas the second table refers to an individual's relationship to other people or society in general (commandments 5-10).

<sup>127</sup> *Journal*, p. 62.

politics themselves that was at issue. From Winthrop's perspective, it was the lack of open communication and accountability to the community as a whole that was more egregious than either of the opinions expressed. That Williams' opinions on breaches of the first table and separatism were not cause for concern or even important enough to write down at the moment they materialized, only noted in the context of this perceived slight to the Boston church and the court, demonstrates that civility, as most Massachusetts puritans understood it, was at stake.

The next two and a half years were relatively peaceful. Williams' first stint at the Salem church was short; he returned to Plymouth in the fall of 1631. A year later, Winthrop visited Plymouth with the Teaching Elder of the Boston church, John Wilson, where they were received cordially by Plymouth governor William Bradford and a Preaching Elder of the Plymouth church, William Brewster. Winthrop and Wilson stayed in the governor's home and "feasted every day at several houses." They also encountered Williams:

On the Lord's day there was a sacrament, which they did partake in; and, in the afternoon, Mr. Roger Williams (according to their custom) propounded a question, to which the pastor, Mr. Smith, spake briefly; then Mr. Williams prophesied; and after that the governor of Plymouth spake to the question; after him the elder; then some two or three more of the congregation. Then the elder desired the governor of Massachusetts [Winthrop, referring to himself in the third person] and Mr. Wilson to speak to it, which they did.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> *Journal*, p. 93.

This entry leaves little room to argue that separatism, the prevailing position of Plymouth colonists, in and of itself was a source of trouble between Williams and Winthrop. Although it appears that the Massachusetts Bay visitors did not join the Plymouth congregation in communion, they participated in the afternoon exchanges that were part of their Sunday worship. From the tone of the journal, it appears that Winthrop and Wilson had a very pleasant stay in Plymouth that caused no offense. Had Williams, or anyone else, said anything that Winthrop considered uncivil, he likely would have said so.

But Winthrop may have left out an exchange that stuck in Williams' craw, which he referenced in a letter following the visit.<sup>129</sup> "Your Christian acceptance of our Cup of cold water is a blessed cup of wine, strong and pleasant to our wearied spirits," Williams began warmly. "Only let me crave a word of explanation." Apparently, perhaps during the visit, Winthrop argued that a church Elder should be at least twenty-five years old. Williams called attention to Winthrop's earlier "pleas for a Young Councillour" and probed whether Winthrop had been indirectly taking a dig at him personally. He went on to remind Winthrop that not only was he "no Elder in any church," but was closer to thirty than twenty-five. Although Winthrop did not say so explicitly, if he did intend the comment to be directed at an individual in New England, that individual was likely Williams, given that the ages of Elders in both colonies at the time presented few alternatives. Unfortunately for Williams, because Winthrop had not outright pointed his finger at him, Winthrop had plausible deniability on his side, and this letter may have

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<sup>129</sup> The letter is undated, but Glenn W. LaFantasie contends that it was likely written sometime between the October 1632 visit and December of that year. LaFantasie, *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*, Vol. I (Brown, 1988), p. 9, n3.



struck Winthrop as unnecessarily combative and reinforced his opinion of Williams' immaturity. At the very least, Winthrop was in a position to fairly present it that way, even if he knew exactly who he meant.

Williams returned to Salem during the summer or fall of 1633. In November 1633, Salem pastor Samuel Skelton and Williams objected to Massachusetts Bay pastors meeting and discussing issues every two weeks, fearing it might "grow in time to a presbytery or superintendency, to the prejudice of the churches' liberties." Winthrop contended that "this fear was without cause," as their meetings did not constitute churches having jurisdiction over one another.<sup>130</sup> This highlights Winthrop's, and others', primary counter to Williams: not that they disagreed with him on limiting the power of the church or creating a "presbytery," but that they were in fact doing no such thing, rendering Williams' fears and complaints baseless and paranoid.

When Williams challenged the king and the royal charter, the content of his opinions themselves received direct pushback. However, as it appears in the journal, the foremost reason for that pushback was not because they were sinful, but because they were treasonous. In December 1633, Winthrop recorded that Williams sent a treatise first to Edward Winslow, then governor of Plymouth, and later to Winthrop's predecessor John Endecott. In the treatise, he disputed the legitimacy of the charter on the grounds that the only legitimate land claims were those "compounded with the natives."<sup>131</sup> The General Court censured Williams on the grounds that he challenged King James' original claim and challenged the current king, Charles. Another aspect of the treatise that caused the

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<sup>130</sup> *Journal*, p. 112-113.

<sup>131</sup> *Journal*, p. 116. See chapter one for an explanation of how his mentorship with Edward Coke influenced this opinion.

censure was that Williams called the king blasphemous for referring to Europe as Christendom, as Williams believed that political entities and churches should not be coterminous.<sup>132</sup> Though this opinion was more theological in nature, it was still spun as an issue about loyalty to the king. It did not matter what the king said that Williams considered blasphemous; charging the king with blasphemy was not a common subject's place. In the coming Civil War in the very near future, New England—Massachusetts included—would be almost entirely populated by Roundheads who would change their patents and charters to reflect loyalty to the Commonwealth instead of the king, but in the 1630s, Williams challenges went too far. Unlike the separatist issue, it seems more apparent in this instance that his opinions themselves were at issue. Yet these opinions were not purely theological; they challenged the geopolitical legitimacy of the colony.

The issue of proper channels of expression returned to the fore in the aftermath of the censure. Winthrop wrote to Endecott to “deal” with Williams and pressure him to retract. Endecott appeared reluctant, and “returned a very modest and discreet answer.” While Endecott defended him, or at least declined to fully participate in suppressing him, Williams deflected the blame for the situation almost entirely to Endecott and Winslow. He claimed that the treatise was originally only intended for Winslow as a private exchange. Later, Endecott requested a copy, presumably after Winslow discussed the treatise with Endecott against Williams' wishes, which Williams dutifully sent him. He insisted that he was not going out of his way to be provocative and offered to have the treatise burnt. As such, no known copies of this treatise survived. At the next meeting of the court, Williams “appeared penitently, and gave satisfaction of his intention and

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<sup>132</sup> *Journal*, p. 116-17.

loyalty. So it was left, and nothing done of it.”<sup>133</sup> Here, again, we have evidence that those in power in Massachusetts Bay were not willing to punish him for his opinions alone, but for the ways he expressed them. Similar to the free grace controversy, smoothing things over and coming to consensus was the first course of action, rather than immediately resorting to censure and punishment.

Williams’ November 1634 court appearance revealed a crack in Winthrop and the court’s insistence that all would be well if only Williams would express his opinions in acceptable ways. In his April 1635 entry, Winthrop elaborated on more contentious specifics of Williams’ teaching. In addition to the teachings already recorded, Williams had “taught publicly, that a magistrate ought not to tender an oath to an unregenerate man, for that we thereby have communion with a wicked man in the worship of God, and cause him to take the name of God in vain.” Public teaching was his profession, and so the opinion itself was the problem. In contrast to his court appearance to address his teachings previously, in this case he was called by the governor before ministers, not the court. While this lends evidence to theology, not the mode of expression, being at issue, it also demonstrates Massachusetts’ efforts to separate secular and ecclesiastical powers. According to Winthrop, the ministers “very clearly confuted” his opinions. “Mr. Endecott was at first of the same opinion, but he gave place to the truth.”<sup>134</sup>

The following passage shows where Massachusetts’ claim to separation of secular and ecclesiastical governance unraveled. Williams was summoned to the General Court again in July of 1635 for “divers dangerous opinions,” some of them primarily religious, and with ministers present. First, for his opinion that “the magistrate ought not to punish

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<sup>133</sup> *Journal*, p. 117.

<sup>134</sup> *Journal*, p. 149.

the breach of the first table, otherwise than in such cases as did disturb the civil peace.” Second, for his opinion that the colony “ought not to tender an oath to an unregenerate man,” and third, that “a man ought not to pray with such [unregenerates], though wife, child, etc.,” part of Williams’ theological belief that a church should only be comprised of true believers, and fourth, that “a man ought not to give thanks after the sacrament nor after meat, etc; and that the other churches were about to write to the church of Salem to admonish him of these errors; notwithstanding the church had since called him to the office of a teacher.”<sup>135</sup>

Williams’ opinions “were adjudged by all, magistrates and ministers (who were desired to be present,)”—in other words, not all magistrates and ministers, indicating that perhaps those who might agree with Williams were not welcome—“to be erroneous, and very dangerous, and the calling of him to office, at that time, was judged a great contempt of authority.” Once again we have admonition of the church at Salem itself for hiring him, not just Williams. Both Williams and the Salem church were urged to “consider of these things till the next general court, or else to expect the sentence.” The court requested ministerial advice. The Ministers advised the court “that he who should obstinately maintain such opinions, (Whereby a church might run into heresy, apostacy, or tyranny, and yet the civil magistrate could not intermeddle,) were to be removed, and that the other churches ought to request the magistrates so to do.”<sup>136</sup>

The above reveals Massachusetts Bay’s defense of their separation of civil and ecclesiastical powers; if the civil magistrates could not technically “intermeddle,” the court, on the advice of ministers and churches, could. Civil and ecclesiastical governance

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<sup>135</sup> *Journal*, p. 154.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

could collaborate, but only with consent of the ecclesiastical side. However, later in July, a Salem man petitioned for land in Marblehead Neck as rightfully belonging to Salem, but because Salem had Williams as their teacher and were therefore in contempt of the magistrates, the petition was denied, demonstrating that these powers were not nearly as separate as they claimed. Though the Salem church itself, not just Williams, had been admonished before, this marked the first time that other churches were invoked and that the town of Salem itself was punished. This marks the moment that the civility controversy broke the dam of containment around Williams and the Salem church. At this juncture, we see the first evidence of the Salem church offering a written response defending their independence as a church and the inappropriateness of the court and magistrate's interference.<sup>137</sup>

In August of that year, Winthrop noted that Williams was now refusing to communicate with any churches that were not committed to separatism.<sup>138</sup> In October, Williams went before the court again. This time, "all the ministers in the bay [were] desired to be present." This all-hands-on-deck approach may have served to quell any lingering solidarity with Williams that may have remained. Williams was admonished for circulating two letters—one, to churches, "complaining of the magistrates for injustice," and the other to the Salem church, "to persuade them to renounce communion with all the churches in the bay, as full of antichristian pollution, etc." Williams was a separatist indeed, not just with the Church of England, but also with the perceived "presbytery" of Massachusetts Bay. Williams did not make any pretense of seeing his error and vowing to

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<sup>137</sup> "The Church at Salem to the Elders of the Church at Boston, after 22 July 1635," *Correspondence*, Vol. I, pp. 23-29.

<sup>138</sup> *Journal*, p. 157.

keep quiet. The court gave the option of “a month’s respite” to revisit the issue. Williams declined and “chose to dispute presently.”<sup>139</sup> Thomas Hooker, who would later run into his own troubles with John Cotton and the Massachusetts establishment and found Connecticut, was “appointed to dispute with him, but could not reduce him from any of his errors.” The following morning, “the court sentenced him to depart out of our jurisdiction within six weeks, all the ministers, save one approving the sentence.” This time, the Salem church did not side with him, and he refused communion with the Salem church. Salem “wrote an humble submission to the magistrates, acknowledging their fault in joining with Mr. Williams in that letter to the churches against them, etc.”<sup>140</sup>

What remains of a lost letter in December 1635 demonstrates that the controversy was already exerting influence on conceptions of civility that Williams would later be well known for. Thomas Thorowgood wrote to Williams to solicit his opinions on Native Americans in order to build a case for his treatise on their Hebrew origins.<sup>141</sup> This indicates that Williams’ opinions on Native sovereignty were quickly garnering a wider audience outside New England. His complete response does not survive, but Thorowgood included portions of it in the treatise published over thirty years later. Williams concurred that certain aspects of Narragansett and Wampanoag culture “make me yet suspect” Jewish lineage, including their origin stories’ similarities to Genesis and women’s isolation during menstruation. From this, he drew the conclusion that Native peoples were not as “barbarous” as many English people imagined.<sup>142</sup> Given that this was written

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<sup>139</sup> *Journal*, p. 162.

<sup>140</sup> *Journal*, p. 163.

<sup>141</sup> Thomas Thorowgood, *Jewes in America, or, Probabilities that the Americans are of that Race* (London: Thorowgood, 1669).

<sup>142</sup> *Correspondence*, Vol. I, p. 30.

before his time living among the Narragansett immediately after his banishment, it allows us to consider pushing the timeline of his formulations about civility in relation to culture earlier. Bejan argues that his insistence in his later publication *Key into the Language of America* that culture had little to do with civility points to his time with the Narragansett after his banishment as a turning point in his concept of civility, but this letter penned near the end of the civility controversy suggests that these ideas were already percolating during his standoff with Massachusetts Bay.<sup>143</sup>

One by one, those with sympathy with Williams fell away, but he was not completely isolated. By January of 1636, Williams had not left Salem yet. He was holding regular meetings of roughly twenty people at his home, similar to how Hutchinson would in the near future. Also similar to Hutchinson, Williams' meetings were likely attended by both women and men, as Winthrop complained around this time that "many [at Salem], especially of devout women, did embrace his opinions..." There was talk of settlement around Narragansett Bay, "from whence," Winthrop worried, "the infection would easily spread into these churches." Banishing him out of Massachusetts was not enough. Williams had to depart America altogether. He would be compelled by force to board the next ship to England. Williams replied that he would be risking his life to do so. Captain John Underhill was assigned to apprehend Williams at his home. By the time Underhill arrived, he found only Williams' wife and children. Roger had already left, tipped off about the impending arrest, he later claimed, by Winthrop himself.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> *Key* was published in London in 1643, the first of Williams' later publications in London.

<sup>144</sup> *Journal*, p. 168. Williams wrote, "First when I was unkindly and unchristianly (I believe) driven from my howse and land, and wife and children (in the midst of N. Engl. winter now about 35 years past) at Salem: That ever honrd Govr Wintrop privately wrote to me to steer my Course to the Nahigonset Bay and Indians..." *Correspondence*, Vol. II, p. 610. That this contradicts what he wrote in the journal about needing to get him out of New England altogether lends evidence to the construction of the narrative in the journal as, at least in part, intended to please a puritan audience, as it probably was not considered private.

If we narrate the civility controversy in the same way that we narrate the free grace controversy, this is where the story ends. While in London during the 1640s securing the Parliamentary Patent for Providence Plantations (which, by the Patent, would encompass Aquidneck Island), Williams would publish several works addressing the civility controversy, mainly addressing the issue of liberty of conscience in his published debates with John Cotton. But by zooming in on the sources contemporaneous with the controversy, we see Winthrop and the court launch a defense of what took place as mainly an issue of civility, which helps explain how Williams formulated his definition of civility when butting heads with religious rivals in Rhode Island later on. Against this backdrop, Williams' open hostility to Quaker settlers in Rhode Island seems, at least from his perspective, less hypocritical. After what happened to him in Massachusetts, he would never again see any inherent value in playing nice.

### **The Antinomians in Rhode Island**

Although Hutchinson and those who accompanied her to Rhode Island were excommunicated, they were still technically “within the church covenant until they were dismissed from Boston to another congregation.”<sup>145</sup> Because the Boston church did not recognize the Newport church as legitimate, these “wandering sheepe” were still part of the Boston church by their measure. Three members, Edward Gibbons, William Hibbins, and John Oliver visited Rhode Island in February and March of 1639 in order to try to bring some of these “wandering sheepe” back to the flock. Their verbal accounts of the journey, given to the Elders of the Boston church John Cotton and John Wilson, were recorded in the notebook of Robert Keayne.

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<sup>145</sup> David D. Hall, ed., *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History* (Duke, 1990), p. 389.



The first night of their travels signified the extent to which those who left Massachusetts as a result of the free grace controversy were not treated as irredeemably divorced from the social world of Boston, not even those closest to Hutchinson. On the first night of their journey, they stayed with Hutchinson's daughter, Faith, and her husband, Thomas Savage. They married in 1637 before joining other free grace controversy exiles in Rhode Island. Savage was a signer of the Portsmouth Compact. Later in 1639, the couple returned to Massachusetts. The three men were "comfortably fitted for [their] jorney the next day." Hibbens, who narrated this first leg of the journey, did not mention anything else about their stay with the Savages other than that it was comfortable, but given the couple's return to Massachusetts later that same year, we can reasonably infer that the visit played a role in persuading them to return. The next night, they planned to "lye with out a Bead," but had the good fortune to meet a traveler from "Cohannet" (near present-day Taunton, Massachusetts) who offered them lodging, which reinforced their belief in the providential blessings that God bestowed upon their endeavor. Hibbens reported that "our god delivered us" from a few setbacks over the next few days, narrowly avoiding two accidents in their "canowe" and finding Oliver again after briefly losing him.<sup>146</sup>

Here, Oliver takes over the narration. The three men carried a letter from the Boston church with them. Meeting with some of whom they called "Our Brethren," as they still considered them members of the Boston church, the visiting men asked them to read and discuss the letter. They declined "for reasons in their owne brest and because of the snowe." The next day, three of the former Bostonians agreed to meet with them. They

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<sup>146</sup> Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy*, p. 390.

read the letter “and gave us satisfactory Answers.” The next day they arrived in Portsmouth and were given lodging by John Coggeshall, another Portsmouth Compact signer close with the Hutchinsons. They asked Coggeshall to deliver their letter to the church and set up a meeting. Coggeshall obliged, but returned with a disappointing message:

But for a meetinge thay did not know what power one church hath over an other church and thay denyed our commission and refused to Let our Letter be read. And they Conseave one church hath not power over the members of another church, and doe not thinke thay are tide to us by our covenant and soe were we fayne to take all thear Answers by goinge to thear severall Houses...<sup>147</sup>

And go to several houses they did. When they finally made it to the Hutchinsons’ home, they first spoke with William Hutchinson, who “tould us he was more nearly tied to his wife than to the church, he thought her to be a dear saint and servant of god.” Then they spoke to Anne. They “tould her that we had a message to doe to her from the Lord and from our church.” Hutchinson was deliberately obtuse. “There are Lords many and gods many but I acknowledge but one Lord, which Lord doe you meane.” They came to agreement on the one God they meant. They repeated that they had a message from their church in Boston. “She replyed she knew no church... for our church she would not acknowledg it any church of Christs.” That is all of the exchange with Anne Hutchinson recorded in the journal.<sup>148</sup> This portrayal of generous, forgiving men on a dangerous and arduous journey to recover their friends, and received warmly, or at least *civilly*—in the

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 391-2.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p. 392.

way they understood the concept—by some, but treated by the central figure of the free grace controversy with such stubbornness, reinforced the narrative construction of Massachusetts as tolerant and its dissidents as “banishing themselves.”<sup>149</sup> Like Williams, Hutchinson had apparently had enough of what Boston considered civil.

As for the answers of the others exiled from the Boston church, they were “divers.” Some, like Hutchinson, no longer recognized the legitimacy of the Boston church. Some did, but considered themselves separated from it and contended that it had no authority over their own church. Some both considered the Boston church legitimate and still considered themselves members, including “mrs dyar,” or Mary Dyer, who eventually returned to Massachusetts where she was later executed for her Quakerism.<sup>150</sup> Commenting on what he had just heard from the men upon their return to Massachusetts, Preaching Elder John Wilson said, “we know not how otherwise to proceed with such than by Cuttinge them of from us...”<sup>151</sup>

In addition to demonstrating Massachusetts’ favored tac of casting themselves as reasonable and their banished as having made their own bed after being given opportunity after opportunity to apologize and recant, all of this took place before the unification of Portsmouth and Newport in 1641 under a government that granted liberty of conscience and assured none would be counted “delinquent for doctrine,” a government some historians have called more “theocratic” than Massachusetts. This

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<sup>149</sup> John Cotton contended that Roger Williams and others banished themselves in *A Letter of Mr. John Cottons, Teacher of the Church in Boston, in New England, to Mr. Williams, a Preacher There* (London: Benjamin Allen, 1643), p. 1.

<sup>150</sup> Hall, *Antinomian Controversy*, p. 392-3.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 394-395.

demonstrates that the threat that the Boston church perceived at that time was not a government without an established church, but a rival puritan theocracy.

### **Conclusion**

The civility controversy in Massachusetts and the aftermath of the free grace controversy in Rhode Island both demonstrate that there was much more at stake between Massachusetts and the earliest English settlers in Rhode Island, and much more at stake in religious power in colonial New England, than the merits of an established church. Whether in the explicitly puritan governments of Massachusetts Bay or early Portsmouth, or the government of the “lively experiment” of Providence and later the united colony of Rhode Island that lacked an ecclesiastical element, the balance of power between distinct sects of early modern Protestantism was set by accepted norms of how these sects could treat each other and the rhetorical tools that the dominant group had at their disposal to cast the narrative. In early New England we see that even in an environment in which persecution necessitated strong justification, while an established church could certainly provide those strong justifications by its very existence, the surrounding culture was capable of providing them on its own.

### Chapter III

## The Protestant Empire Dug Out of Its Burrows: Enforcing Hegemony in the Rhode Island Quaker Debates

In 1671, Roger Williams interrupted a Quaker meeting in Newport. He wrote:

Going the last year to one of their general Assemblies at New-Port, and having begun to present to them some Considerations about the True Christ and the false, the True Spirit and the False and being cut of[f] in the midst [midst], by sudden Prayer of one, and the Singing of another, and then by the Prayer of another and the sudden dissolving of the Assembly.<sup>152</sup>

Williams' word choice may have signaled his resentment toward Quaker political power in 1670s Rhode Island. "Meeting" was the more common term for a Friends' gathering for worship, business, or both, but they would occasionally refer to such gatherings as "assemblies" or "general assemblies," which gives the historian sufficient evidence to assume that he interrupted a Quaker meeting rather than a meeting of the colony's General Assembly.<sup>153</sup> Yet his decision to refer to it as a "general assembly," when "meeting" would have sufficed, called to mind that Quakers steadily accumulated significant political power between their arrival in Rhode Island in 1657 and the early 1670s—including *the* General Assembly—at the expense of Williams and his political allies.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Roger Williams, *George Fox Digg'd out of his Burrowes, Or an Offer of DISPUTATION On fourteen Proposalls made this last Summer 1672 (so call'd) unto G. Fox then present on Rode-Island in New-England* (Boston: John Foster, 1676), p. 2.

<sup>153</sup> Even meetings that primarily covered business, such as monthly or yearly meetings, were considered gatherings for worship. London Quakers appear to have been the Quakers who most frequently referred to their gatherings as "Assemblies," including their "General Assembly"; Williams' London experience may have inspired his decision to use this phrase, in addition to its meaning in a Rhode Island context.

<sup>154</sup> Williams, having served as president of the colony from 1654-57, was not reelected after his dispute with William Harris, an ally to the Quaker political faction though not Quaker himself. Arthur J. Worrall argues that "the behavior

Williams included this anecdote in *George Fox Digg'd Out of his Burrowes*, an over five-hundred-page tome that primarily recounts his public debates with Quakers in Newport and Providence during the summer of 1672.<sup>155</sup> Here Williams adopts a tactic of his earlier persecutors, portraying himself as reasonable against opponents who refused to engage—or were incapable of engaging—on reasonable terms. The tone of this account seems intended to suggest mildness in Williams' own demeanor while “presenting considerations,” whether or not the people he interrupted interpreted it that way. By drowning him out with prayer and song, and eventually dissolving the meeting, Quakers proved, from his perspective, that they were naught but overly sensitive cowards who resorted to emotion, noise, and spectacle when faced with honest and sincere debate.

For all that we may see the inheritance of his former persecutors, the Williams of the 1630s—a man committed to voicing what he believed to be the truth even when the settings in which he did so were considered inappropriate—still comes through. As argued in the previous chapter, Williams' experience during the civility controversy in Massachusetts influenced his opinion that such was the inevitable companion of freedom of conscience. Although both Massachusetts and Rhode Island aimed to discredit claims to persecution by religious minorities considered troublesome, in Rhode Island we see this enacted not by the colonial government, but by a concerned and highly motivated

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of the Williams faction [in the Harris dispute] had provided the impetus for the Quaker electoral victory,” characterizing the faction as “arbitrary and oligarchic” (Worrall, “Persecution, Politics, and War: Roger Williams, Quakers, and King Philip’s War,” *Quaker History* 66, no. 2 (Autumn 1977), p. 77). The Quaker political influence was due in part to colonists arriving having already converted to Quakerism, but it was also due to colonists who were already entrenched figures in Rhode Island politics and later becoming Quakers. For example, Rhode Island’s first Quaker governor, Nicholas Easton, had been president of the colony during 1650 and 1651 and became a Quaker after his term. He was elected governor in May 1672.

<sup>155</sup> David S. Lovejoy also cites a letter from Williams to William Coddington recounting his interruption that includes additional details of the encounter not included in *George Fox*. Lovejoy makes the case that Williams’ dissatisfaction with this event influenced his desire to call for a formal debate. Lovejoy, “Roger Williams and George Fox: The Arrogance of Self-Righteousness,” *NEQ* 66, 2 (June 1993): 203-204.

individual. This anecdote represents an example of how religiously motivated harassment and intimidation could, and did, take place in colonial Rhode Island, but carried out in such a way that was only acceptable in Rhode Island due to its protection of freedom of conscience. Williams had greater permission to behave this way in Rhode Island than he did in Massachusetts forty years prior. In Williams' own words regarding a Quaker he identifies as his "neighbor Mrs Scot," "What the whip at Boston Could not doe, Converse with friends in Engl. and their Argumts, have in great Measure drawne her from the Quakers, and wholly from their Meetings: Try the Spirits."<sup>156</sup> Only in Rhode Island could the godly fairly and peacefully "try the spirits" of Quakers. For Rhode Island Quakers, escaping the gallows of Massachusetts and garnering legitimate political power came with a price: all verbal antagonism was fair game—not even their meetinghouses were off limits. In this way, by encouraging freedom of conscience in law and culture, seventeenth-century Rhode Island also encouraged an interpersonal approach to quelling the influence of religious groups considered threatening. Furthermore, this interpersonal approach could spill into legal consequences, such as the mistrust of, and alterations to, Quaker military exemptions—contemporaneous with the publication of *George Fox*—analyzed in chapter one.<sup>157</sup>

How did Williams' former persecutors react? Some historians point out that Williams' publication of *George Fox* in Boston greatly pleased the puritan establishment of Massachusetts.<sup>158</sup> Although Charles II issued what amounted to a de facto ban on

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<sup>156</sup> *Correspondence*, Vol. II, p. 501.

<sup>157</sup> The 1676 alteration of the 1673 exemption discussed in chapter one may have been more directly tied to King Philip's War, but the 1676 publication of *George Fox* probably did not help.

<sup>158</sup> This approval is noted in John M. Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul* (New York: Penguin, 2012), p. 383; James P. Byrd, Jr. *The Challenges of Roger Williams: Religious Liberty, Violent Persecution, and the Bible* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002), p. 52; Skaggs, p. 83.

Quaker executions in Massachusetts in 1661, Quaker persecution continued in the colony, perhaps buoyed by the glowing reception that the book received.<sup>159</sup> The extent to which *George Fox* directly influenced continued persecution of Quakers in Massachusetts is impossible to measure, but the noted approval from some puritan elites suggests that it exerted at least some influence. Cotton Mather came to similar conclusions about the outcome of the civility controversy as his grandfather, John Cotton, but reflecting on the Quaker debate roughly thirty years on, he praised Williams for defending “the main principles of the Protestant religion.”<sup>160</sup> Mather and other Massachusetts puritans astutely understood that one of Williams’ most urgent priorities in his debates with Rhode Island Quakers, and his exhaustive account of them, was to defend Protestantism itself. Isolating and targeting sects like Quakers helped maintain broad consensus in acceptable Protestant theology and behavior, which was necessary to preserving Protestant hegemony in Rhode Island, New England, and the English Atlantic.

I argue that English colonists in seventeenth-century Rhode Island maintained Protestant hegemony using two distinct but related strategies. Rhode Island directly inherited one of these strategies from Massachusetts Bay, which featured prominently in the civility controversy: to undermine claims of persecution as disingenuous or exaggerated in order to render justification of persecution based on conscience moot.

During Williams’ published exchanges with John Cotton about the civility controversy a

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<sup>159</sup> Charles II’s declaration made permission from the Crown a requirement for further Quaker executions (“Letter Sent from Charles the 2d King of England to New England, 9 Sept. 1661,” *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 39 (1871), 159-60, cited in Carla Pestana, “The Quaker Executions as Myth and History,” *The Journal of American History* 80, No. 2 (Sept. 1993): 442, n. 2). As Massachusetts elites understood that they were very unlikely to receive that permission, it appears that it was never requested, and no Quaker executions took place following it.

<sup>160</sup> Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana: or, The Ecclesiastical History of New-England* (Hartford: Silas Andrus and Son, 1853), p. 499. Cited in Donald, Skaggs, *Roger Williams’ Dream for America* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), p. 94.



decade after the fact, Cotton maintained that Williams was not persecuted in Massachusetts Bay for his theology, for many in Massachusetts who held Williams' same beliefs lived peaceable lives in the colony. Rather, by his uncivil behavior, he banished himself.<sup>161</sup> However well this strategy worked in Massachusetts, it worked even better in Rhode Island, which, during the mid to late seventeenth century, had stronger legal codification of liberty of conscience.<sup>162</sup> This enabled more interpersonal forms of antagonism only possible with increased liberty of conscience at the same time that it made claims to religious persecution seem particularly absurd in the Rhode Island context, and the complainants ungrateful to Rhode Island's legal protections. Although Williams did not attempt to discredit Quakers' claims to persecution in Massachusetts and the English Atlantic at large, he contended that persecution alone did not validate one's beliefs, that Quakers enjoyed exaggerating their oppression with a twisted vanity, that his own record of defending liberty of conscience made their accusations of his "persecuting spirit" indefensible, and that they cried persecution in Rhode Island while the colony put its reputation on the line for them.

The second strategy of maintaining Protestant hegemony in seventeenth-century Rhode Island was to represent broad English Protestant interests that transcended

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<sup>161</sup> Cotton wrote, "There be at this day that banish (and separate) themselves from all the churches in the country [Massachusetts Bay], and yet are not banished out of the country: and there by that are banished out of the country, and yet are not banished out of the fellowship of all the churches in the country" (Jeremiah Lewis Diman, ed., John Cotton, *Master John Cotton's Answer to Master Roger Williams* (Providence: Narragansett Club, 1867), p. 42). As covered in chapter two, the latter half of this assertion applies to the exiles of the free grace controversy. I believe my coverage of the situation in chapter two shows that such a statement was, while technically true, wildly misleading. As argued in chapter two, Cotton and Williams' printed exchanges over the civility controversy and liberty of conscience more broadly brought liberty of conscience to the fore as the most prominent issue at stake in the conflict.

<sup>162</sup> In chapter two, I argue that liberty of conscience was not as strongly codified in Rhode Island law as previous historians suggest. In chapter four, I argue that by the turn of the eighteenth century, laws protecting liberty of conscience and worship in Massachusetts and Rhode Island were extremely similar, with the major difference between the two being Massachusetts' congregational establishment.

individual denominations. While the first strategy came from Massachusetts but functioned effectively, perhaps even more so, in Rhode Island, the second strategy set Rhode Island apart from neighboring puritan projects. Rhode Island owed its continued existence to the London lobbying of men like Williams, Samuel Gorton, and John Clarke to Parliament and the Crown, which gave it the upper hand against the interests of Massachusetts.<sup>163</sup> Jonathan Beecher Field argues that Rhode Island dissidents “did more to frame their appeals in contexts that were legible to metropolitan readers than did their rivals.” Massachusetts, by contrast, wrote from a “provincial perspective,” which offered little incentive for support from Parliament or the Crown.<sup>164</sup> Roger Williams and Samuel Gorton managed to get London on their side and survive attempted incursions by Massachusetts and Connecticut by appealing to a patriotism and framing themselves as integral to the English presence in the region. As Parliament and the Crown saw it, Rhode Island was in it for England; Massachusetts was in it for Massachusetts.

Rhode Island’s religious toleration and lack of established church aided, rather than detracted from, this purpose. Carla Pestana argues that due to the “weak” establishment of the Church of England, “expansion established a broadly shared culture” among Protestants, who united in “a common Anglophone spiritual orientation.”<sup>165</sup> “Any plan to make the state church a central pillar of the British Atlantic was doomed,” Pestana contends, due to the Church of England’s tenuous presence in the colonies, settlement of many different groups, and the increasing popularity of toleration.<sup>166</sup> As Field also

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<sup>163</sup> See chapter one for more detailed discussion on obtaining the Parliamentary Patent and the Royal Charter.

<sup>164</sup> Jonathan Beecher Field, *Errands into the Metropolis: New England Dissidents in Revolutionary London* (Dartmouth College Press, 2012), p. 12.

<sup>165</sup> Carla Pestana, *Protestant Empire: Religion and the Making of the British Atlantic World* (Penn, 2011), p. 6.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8. See the introduction of this dissertation for discussion of how the establishment of the Church of England does not, by default, legally extend beyond England itself in the absence of explicit formal establishment in a colony or realm.

highlights, from the perspective of London and Williams, toleration was at least in part “pragmatic,” which is lost in a framing of support for toleration as purely altruistic.<sup>167</sup> Bringing Pestana’s framework of a broad and diffuse Protestant empire together with Field’s insights on Rhode Island’s relationship to the metropole, we see affirmation from London that Rhode Island better served the project of building an English Protestant empire than Massachusetts because it represented a bastion of broad English Protestantism in a contentious and volatile region.

However, this broad Protestantism could only thrive by pruning the Protestant branches most difficult to support and distancing itself from sects that embarrassed it on the world stage. Given that toleration was a cornerstone of this broad Protestantism, dismissing accusations of religious bigotry was critical to its success and shows how the two strategies supported one another. Maintaining Protestant hegemony meant that broad Protestant interests inclusive of differences among denominations needed to be represented, but that broad representation also meant that if radicalism and disorder in a specific denomination could not be sanded over, then that denomination needed to be discredited from the project of transatlantic Protestantism altogether for that project to succeed. As such, Quakers were cast as not truly Protestants at all. Quakers may not have been exiled from the “common earth and aire” of Rhode Island, but the 1672 debates represent their exile from the essential English Protestantism that Rhode Island relied upon for its continued political survival.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Field, p. 15.

<sup>168</sup> *Complete Writings*, Vol. I, p. 326.

## Dreadful Misunderstandings

In the latter half of the twentieth century and into the early twenty-first, historians have been eager to counter claims that Williams participated in the persecution of Quakers and readily commend him for restraining himself to dispassionate debate. This perspective is perhaps best encapsulated by Edwin Gaustad:

See, some commentators say, he did not really believe in religious liberty, because he told the Quakers they were wrong! What a dreadful misunderstanding this is. Yes, Williams told the Quakers they were wrong and for several days debated their religious principles with them. But no, he did not prevent their moving to and thriving in Rhode Island. And he did not allow the hand of the state ever to be raised against them. Nor did he fine, jail, whip, or hang any Quakers, or permit others to do so. Williams, who cared deeply about his own faith and his own conscience, would, with equal passion and devotion, ever care about and protect the conscience of others.<sup>169</sup>

This commentary implies the existence of a robust literature of scholars who point out Williams' hypocrisy at the time of Gaustad's writing in the early twenty-first century, yet few scholars have labeled Williams a hypocrite for his engagement with Quakers since Perry Miller called the attempt of "modern admirers... to fit Williams into their patterns of liberality" an "an utter failure to comprehend Williams' mind" forty years prior.<sup>170</sup> Most scholarship from Miller to the present waxes poetic about Williams'

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<sup>169</sup> Edwin S. Gaustad, *Roger Williams* (Oxford, 2005), p. 107-108.

<sup>170</sup> Perry Miller, *Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), p. 28. One example of early twentieth century scholarship that implied irony or hypocrisy in Williams' approach to

commitment to dispassionate debate and uncritically portrays Rhode Island Quakers just as Williams saw them: boisterous fanatics who withered at the slightest suggestion of intellectual and theological rigor.

David S. Lovejoy offers an alternative perspective that productively interrogates our admiration for Williams' superior debate skills. That Quakers "blunted some of the sharp edges of theology" was not necessarily an indication of their "religious weakness or theological ignorance." Instead, it can be seen as a conscious rejection of "a suffocating spiritual past" and a deliberate challenge to the merits and relevance of debating "tired old doctrine."<sup>171</sup> In this framing, Quakers' frustration with the type of theological debate that Williams favored was not necessarily due to its difficulty, but its obsolescence. We can extend Lovejoy's intervention beyond better understanding the seventeenth-century Quaker perspective to better understanding our own. Historians tend side with Williams, opposite Quakers, in appraising the inherent value of the exegesis they engage in, and unconsciously take the position that the worthiness of a religious belief lies in its intellectual defensibility. Historians who agree with Perry Miller that "the modern spirit should heed" Williams' position that "[speaking] with the accents of spiritual finality... is

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Quakers includes the work of Emily Easton, who wrote that "The violent, railing language is the contradiction of the gentle spirit of tolerance that has formerly characterized him, the apostle of religious liberty" and that the Quaker debates did not "add to the greatness of Roger Williams" (Emily Easton, *Roger Williams: Prophet and Pioneer* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1930) p. 358). While Miller and other historians since have focused on arguing that his opposition to Quaker theology was not intellectually inconsistent with his views on liberty of conscience, they have largely ignored the other piece of Easton's assertion: tone. One who has read the entirety of Williams' writing on Quakers would have a very difficult time arguing against the position that his tone was indeed "violent" and "railing," and so to say that his approach to Quakers counters an image of him as "gentle" is quite fair, regardless of the intellectual or theological consistency of his beliefs. Easton also condemns "disorderly" behavior on the part of Quakers and concedes that "the early persecutors did have provocation" (p. 331).

<sup>171</sup>Lovejoy, p. 224.

a danger to the spirit,”<sup>172</sup> should approach the Quaker debates fully conscious of the potential implications of that perspective for their interpretations.

Gaustad’s charge prompts the question: was Williams motivated by bigotry or by a sincere desire for theological debate? Most scholars since Miller argue for the latter, framing Williams’ engagement with Quakers as reluctant; given his intellectual and theological inclinations, he had no choice.<sup>173</sup> While most scholars see his efforts, in the face of ageing and illness, to debate Quakers as evidence in favor of his sincere commitment to theological truth at all costs, this sidesteps the question of why he did not behave this way toward other religious groups in the colony. That Williams harbored specific animosity toward Quakers provides a plausible answer to the question of why he never exerted so much effort to debate other sects. *George Fox Digg’d Out of His Burrowes* is littered with unflattering commentary on Judaism, for example, but Williams never called upon Newport’s nascent Jewish community for debate. Granted, the debates were precipitated by George Fox’s visit to Rhode Island; we cannot say how Williams would have reacted to an equivalent Jewish figure visiting the colony.<sup>174</sup>

If Williams did hold what we might call bigotry toward Quakers, then why?

Edmund Morgan notes that Quakers were “the only pretenders to church estate who

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<sup>172</sup> Miller, p. 242.

<sup>173</sup> Donald Skaggs writes that “Williams felt compelled to expose their doctrines” (p. 80) and that “as God’s watchman, he felt an obligation to warn the world that the Quakers could not show the way to Zion” (p. 81). Of his intentions, L. Raymond Camp writes, “Williams’s concern was genuine. His impulse to debate differences of opinion... was also genuine.” (Camp, *Roger Williams, God’s Apostle of Advocacy: Biography and Rhetoric* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen Press, 1989), p. 210). Although writing before Miller, Easton also writes that “to the prophet Roger Williams, convinced of error of a misguided people, the duty and opportunity of bearing witness to the truth among them were not to be denied” (Easton, p. 355).

<sup>174</sup> Williams intended to specifically debate Fox, but his request did not reach Fox before he departed the colony. In drawing this comparison, it is also necessary to point out that while Christianity seeks converts, Judaism does not, and so English Protestants did not see themselves as in competition for souls with Jews, but they did see themselves in competition with one another.

received the full measure of Williams' skepticism" and offers some explanation for the "unusual anger which this subject stirred in him." He points to an observation Williams made to Cotton in attempting to explain why puritans experienced more persecution from Anglicans than separatists: "it is a principle in nature to preferre a professedemie, before a pretended friend." "Something like this principle made Williams hate the Quakers," Morgan concluded. "They looked for all the world like the prophets in sackcloth among whose number he counted himself."<sup>175</sup> It may have infuriated Williams that Quaker experiences with persecution so closely mirrored his own. Instead of prompting solidarity, it prompted resentment. Perhaps in reading and listening to discourse on Quakers, Williams more clearly saw how Anglicans and puritans saw him. If he did not like what he saw, acrimonious projection could follow. Donald Skaggs made the following related observation: "Being labeled a schismatic, Williams was pleased to establish that he was a true Protestant."<sup>176</sup> Participating in the marginalization of Quakers changed his order in the hierarchy of Protestant hegemony.

Williams' antipathy may have also arisen not just from his proximity to Quakers in theology and narratives of persecution, but also from his interpersonal proximity. Miller noted that many of Williams' enemies converted, but *George Fox* also calls attention to impact on Williams of his friends becoming Friends.<sup>177</sup> The book contains three exchanges of letters with John Throckmorton, Williams' "former antient Neighbour and friend" and one of the original proprietors of Providence. Throckmorton initiated the back and forth of letters by attacking Williams, in Williams' words, "as a man would fall

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<sup>175</sup> Edmund Morgan, *Roger Williams: The Church and the State* (New York: Harcourt, 1967), pp. 56-7.

<sup>176</sup> Skaggs, p. 83.

<sup>177</sup> Miller, p. 243.

upon a Toad or a Serpent... notwithstanding he was but newly bitten by them; and for forty yeares pretended no small love and respect to God and me.”<sup>178</sup> Emphasizing the newness of Throckmorton’s belief and animosity toward him, after decades of good theology and good relations, suggests that Williams saw a rash social contagion taking place in his circles.

Yet while Morgan and Skagg’s observations offer compelling explanations interior to Williams as an individual, it is my intention to look to the implications of this proximity between Williams and Quakers, and his effort to distinguish himself from them, beyond his own head and heart. Present at the debates were Baptists equally as eager as Williams to discredit, and distance themselves from, Quakers. The similarities in the social and political positions of Quakers and other dissenting Protestants meant that Quaker persecution could spill into the persecution of Baptists, puritans, and others, and any behavior or beliefs on the part of Quakers that threatened to further their marginalization equally threatened to further marginalize other dissenters. Baptists may have felt that putting as much distance as possible between themselves and Quakers might save them. Furthermore, Quaker similarities to other dissenting groups threatened the broader project of creating a Protestant world, because if this widely condemned Protestant sect were viewed as part of the Protestant project, the project could be discredited in its entirety.

In summary, the compulsion to protect Williams from accusations of bigotry and elevate him as an idealized objective debater obstructs a full understanding of the stakes of the debates for Quakers, for Rhode Island, for English Protestantism, and for the

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<sup>178</sup> *George Fox*, p. 7. Throckmorton is identified in the text with the initials “I. [J.] T.” That “I. T.” is John Throckmorton is corroborated by the letters to and from him in *Correspondence*, Vol. II.



English presence in North America. To be sure, Roger Williams had a voracious appetite for debate and exegesis—and was very good at both. His theological disagreements with Quakers were substantial and genuine. I do not disagree that *George Fox* suggests that his command of Scripture was greater than that of his debate opponents combined. However, assigning excess value to those observations may distract the scholar from paying due attention to the broader implications that Williams’ priorities evidenced in the debates.

### **A Key to *George Fox***

This chapter primarily revolves around analysis of Williams’ anti-Quaker *George Fox Digg’d Out of His Burrowes*, published in Boston in 1676. The core of the over five-hundred-page book is a retelling of his public debates with Quakers in Newport and Providence—three days and one day, respectively—during the summer of 1672. It begins with introductory addresses by Williams to Charles II and to Quakers and then narrates the course of events in the debates, including the letters and exchanges leading up to and during them. The final third of the book is an appendix in which he offers additional critical commentary on George Fox’s writings. Williams intended to debate George Fox himself during his visit to Rhode Island, but Fox departed before receiving Williams’ request.<sup>179</sup> Instead, he primarily debated John Stubs, John Burnet, and William Edmondson.

Historians have described *George Fox* as “repetitious, tiresome,” “tedious,” “long winded,” and “unreadable.”<sup>180</sup> Yet even to the historian unconcerned with the most

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<sup>179</sup> Williams claims that Fox and his followers intentionally arranged matters in such a way that Fox could plausibly deny having any knowledge that Williams intended to debate him before leaving, despite Fox knowing his intent “many dayes before his departure.” (p. v).

<sup>180</sup> Morgan, p. 56; Easton, p. 358; Lovejoy, p. 205; Miller, p. 245.

granular theological discourse contained in the text, implications for Rhode Island's place in the English Protestant empire can be wrested from it. Several historians have accomplished the impressive task of extracting the details of this work into concise and digestible narratives.<sup>181</sup> Instead of attempting to improve upon those endeavors, my aim is to intervene on what these debates tell us about the early modern Protestant English empire and Rhode Island's role in supporting it, bringing in contextual information and analysis from primary and secondary sources to unpack specific points. Wrapping one's mind entirely around *George Fox* is made easier in the early twenty-first century with digital editions that can be manipulated. Using simple word searches of a digital edition, I placed some footholds and anchors to facilitate the scaling of this otherwise sheer cliff of a publication.<sup>182</sup>

When compared to how historians typically describe the priorities of the publication, the metadata yield a few surprising results. Based on historiography that mainly focuses on Quakers uncivil behavior and contends that Williams' primarily detested Quakers for that reason, one might expect that civility and order would dominate

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<sup>181</sup> L. Raymond Camp's narration of the events of the debates in Newport and Providence, with the intention of recreating the experience of attending them in person as closely as possible, is perhaps the most immersive and complete written to date save *George Fox* itself. His attention to the participation of the audience, split between Baptists and Quakers, draws out an often overlooked dynamic: that this was as much a debate between Baptists and Quakers as between Williams and Quakers. At the same time, the rhetoric that Camp employs in his narration gives the reader the impression that Williams was an unflappable debater that the Quakers were thoroughly humiliated in their inability to match him; I believe this takes the biases highlighted in this chapter for granted. Nevertheless, Camp's account of the events of the debates is complete, accurate, and valuable even if the reader takes issue with the bias that otherwise colors it. (Camp, pp. 185-197).

<sup>182</sup> I conducted these word searches using an OCR-generated text edition (Roger Williams, *George Fox Digg'd Out of His Burrowes* (Boston: John Foster, 1676; Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership), <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A66448.0001.001>), both in a web browser and in a word processor to which the text was copied and pasted. I qualify each number with "at least" because the following may have prevented further findings: 1) errors in the OCR, 2) alternate spellings that did not occur to me, and 3) the frequent appearance of the character |, called a "bar" or "pipe" in typography, in this text edition, often in the middle of a word, which would prevent that word's appearance in a search. It is also worth noting, for scholars who may wish to build upon this analysis with other terms, that "J" is often typed as "I," though this issue was not relevant to the terms I searched.

the text. Variations of “civil” appear fifty-five times and “order” appears thirty-nine times, for a total of ninety-four instances, or roughly one mention for every five-and-a-half pages. That number dwindles to eighty-seven if we exclude more benign uses of “order” in phrases such as “in order to,” “he ordered that...,” or “order” used as a specific noun (such as an order from a person or a governing body) as opposed to the general noun “order” that refers to the concept.

The topic of persecution appears to be raised slightly more often. Variations of the word “persecute” appear at least thirty-seven times, with an additional four mentions of variations on “oppression” and “oppressor.” When speaking of religious oppression, Williams and other debate participants also used the word “suffer,” variations of which appear at least ninety-seven times; however, only roughly half (at least forty-five) of those instances use “suffer” in the sense of experiencing pain or hardship, the other half using “suffer” as synonymous with “tolerate” or “bear.” Variations of “martyr” appear twelve times. Adding variations of “persecute,” “oppress,” “suffer” (in the first sense), and “martyr” together, there are at least ninety-eight instances of reference to religious persecution, or approximately one mention for every five pages.

Discussion of Protestantism and Catholicism clearly overwhelms discussion of civility and order or persecution, with four hundred and twenty-eight mentions, averaging approximately one mention for every one-and-a-quarter pages. The word “Protestant” appears at least ninety-eight times, some of those instances in service to forwarding his opinions that Quakers were not true Protestants, others in reference to the cause of Protestantism globally. The words “pope,” “popish,” “papist,” and “papacy” appear at

least three hundred and twenty-two times.<sup>183</sup> Although historians have long pointed to the importance of civility to this event and this document, these numbers instead suggest that the project of Protestantism against the forces of popery was Williams' more pressing priority. Historians have neglected to view this event and this source as championing broad Protestantism, let alone primarily so. Yet the metadata force us to confront this priority, and I hope to demonstrate that a qualitative analysis bears this as faithfully as the quantitative.

One method of defending Protestant hegemony demonstrated in this text was dismissing claims to persecution. Although he did not outright dismiss that Quakers faced persecution in Massachusetts, he accused them of exaggerating their persecution and relishing their victim status. Furthermore, he contends that simply because someone suffered for their religious beliefs did not inherently make those beliefs correct, that his own record proves it impossible for him to be a bigot, and that they lacked appreciation for the fact that Rhode Island sacrificed its own reputation for their benefit.

Williams also defended English Protestant hegemony by discrediting Quakers from Protestantism and the English Protestant empire. Williams saw Quaker theology as essentially Catholic in its reliance on the supposed infallibility of an individual, which threatened law and order. He strengthens his case that Quakers were not true Protestants by arguing that, more than simply departing theologically from most Protestants, they did not ecclesiastically descend from Protestants. I will also demonstrate that Williams saw Quaker behavior through racial and gendered lenses with Protestantism at stake. Finally, I

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<sup>183</sup> As most early modern Protestants did, Williams used the term "Catholick" to refer to all Christians rather than to Roman Catholics. The term appears four times, three of those instances paired with the term "universal."

demonstrate how he framed the publication to Charles II and his wider audience as a defense of geopolitical English Protestantism.

### *Causa Facit Martyrem*

Williams echoed a position that many Protestants felt compelled to defend in an era of increasing Protestant diversity. Of the fourteen propositions he circulated before the debates, the twelfth read: “The Sufferings of the Quakers are no true evidence of the Truth of their Religion.”<sup>184</sup> During the debate at Providence, in response to discussion of Quaker persecution, Williams referenced “that ancient and true Maxime, *Causa facit Martyrem*,” which was Martin Luther’s paraphrasing of a passage from a sermon by St. Augustine which translates to “the cause makes a martyr”—suffering alone does not prove that one’s cause or belief is correct.<sup>185</sup> This echoed boundaries that puritans placed around martyrdom in England and New England.<sup>186</sup> If anyone could claim martyrdom at will, then it cheapened the claims of the true martyrs. Williams did not pass up the opportunity to compare George Fox and his followers to John Foxe’s work *Actes and Monuments*, widely known as Foxe’s Book of Martyrs: “It is wonderfull how their spirit (professing to be Protestants) can so wickedly strike in with the bloody spirit of the Papists, against the Witnesses and Martyrs of Jesus, compiled by that heavenly I. [J.] Fox.

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<sup>184</sup> p. 5.

<sup>185</sup> p. 270. This paraphrasing of St. Augustine, “non poena, sed causa facit matyrem,” or “not a punishment, but a cause makes a martyr,” comes from Martin Luther, *Sämmtliche Schriften: Die Catechisische Schriften und Predigten* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1892) p. 901. The original phrasing, “Non facit martyrem poena, sed causa,” comes from St. Augustine’s sermon, “In Natali Martyrum” or “On a Feast of Martyrs” (Robert Wiśniewski, “Cult of Saints, E04167,” University of Oxford, 2021, accessed 18 January 2023, <http://cs.la.history.ox.ac.uk/record.php?recid=E04167>). Given how much attention Williams pays to how Quakers compare to Catholics, it is ironic that the phrase originates with one of the most revered of Catholic saints. It is possible—though in my opinion, given Williams’ level of education, unlikely—that he was not aware of its origin prior to its invocation by Martin Luther, given that he uses Luther’s paraphrasing.

<sup>186</sup> See p. 72, n. 114 of chapter 2 of this dissertation for historiographical discussion of the boundaries of martyrdom in colonial New England.

in the Book of Martyrs.”<sup>187</sup> While the followers of George Fox crudely attempted to position themselves as akin to the holy martyrs chronicled by John Foxe, they were more alike to those true martyrs’ oppressors in their theology and behavior, the fact that the King had to intervene in their executions in Massachusetts notwithstanding.

Not only was Quaker suffering meaningless, but Quakers seemed to perversely enjoy and exaggerate their victimization. Quakers had less claim to suffering than genuine martyrs, “yet they set down such exact accounts of every hour in prison every Stripe in Whipping,” which proved that they “declare such Lysts and Catalogues of Sufferings... only in a childish Vapour, Ostentation and Vain-Glory, much less in hopes of Reparations.” In this framing, the purpose of publicizing their sufferings was not to put a stop it, but to indulge their narcissism. When John Stubs replied that “they did not boast of their Sufferings, but bare them patiently for the Truths sake,” Williams replied that he “could find no Iewes, no Papists no Protestants, that did so magnifie and so exactly insist upon their Sufferings as the Quakers did.”<sup>188</sup> Scholars concur that proliferation of accounts of Quaker persecution were indeed disproportionately voluminous. According to Jonathan Beecher Field, “in contrast to the individuated first-person narratives published by Gorton or John Clarke, the actual number of cases of Quaker persecution was dwarfed by ever-proliferating accounts of the same few events.”<sup>189</sup> However, a more charitable perspective could view the proliferation as matching the intensity of Quaker persecution in a short period of time, communicating urgency instead of self-indulgence.

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<sup>187</sup> p. 241.

<sup>188</sup> p. 266-7.

<sup>189</sup> Beecher Field, p. 90. Beecher Field points this out in service to his argument that Quaker publications were unusual in the context of similar transatlantic early modern discourse, such as the writings of Williams or John Cotton, in that they often were not authored and published by the person who experienced religious persecution, and retold many times over.

Williams also countered claims that he targeted Quakers due to his own prejudice by pointing to his own record. In his published exchanges with Cotton about the civility controversy, Williams articulated his position on liberty of conscience, culminating in his most rigorous defense in *The Bloody Tenent*, published in London in 1644, which was so popular and so inflammatory that Parliament ordered it burned by the common hangman. Quakers accused him of having a “persecuting spirit,” to which Williams replied, “the most High hath been a holy witness to my Travels and losses and hazards and other sufferings, in my vindicating and procuring Soul-liberty.”<sup>190</sup> From his vantage point, his record of advocating for liberty of conscience and his own experience with persecution rendered it impossible for him to unduly persecute anyone. Besides, how could he be labeled a bigot against Quakers when he had Quaker friends that he “knew and did love and honour”?<sup>191</sup> He cited that God blessed him with “to converse with some Turks, Jews, Papists, and all sorts of Protestants, and by Books to know the Affairs and Religions of all Countries, &c.” during his education and career.<sup>192</sup> This, he contended, qualified him to conclude that “amongst Jews and Turks, Papists and Protestants and Pagans (with all of which I have conversed) I never met with such a Judging Censuring Reviling spirit as is the spirit of the Quakers.”<sup>193</sup>

Whatever antagonism Quakers faced in Rhode Island, they could not expect any better, and the debates made them seem ungrateful to what Rhode Island had done for them. Part of his motivation for holding the debate was “the vindicating” of Rhode Island “for receiving of such persons whome others would not.” The people of Rhode Island

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<sup>190</sup> p. 29.

<sup>191</sup> p. 39.

<sup>192</sup> p. iv.

<sup>193</sup> p. 19-20.

“suffer for their sakes,” and for their trouble, “are accounted their Abettors” by Quaker enemies in the metropole and colonies.<sup>194</sup> Here, Williams was likely referring to the refusal of Rhode Island to banish Quakers in exchange for admission to the United Colonies, a military alliance that formed in the aftermath of the Pequot War.<sup>195</sup> Quakers could not expect better conditions anywhere outside of Rhode Island. Any complaint Quakers lodged against Williams or the colony for subjecting them to persecution reinforced Williams’ contention that they were looking for any opportunity to cast themselves as martyrs. No level of protection could satisfy them.

Whether or not any of Williams’ contentions were fair—that not all who were whipped or executed were innocent and godly, that Quaker claims to martyrdom only served a monstrous pride, that Williams’ record of religious toleration was unassailable, and that Rhode Island provided the best conditions Quakers could hope for—is beside the point that this perspective served to neutralize complaints of oppression without having to defend oppression itself. Although Massachusetts also employed this tactic, the Rhode Island context maximized its power.

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<sup>194</sup> p. 40.

<sup>195</sup> Many historians romantically recount this noble sacrifice on Rhode Island’s part. At the same time, it is critical to note that the United Colonies formed before either Rhode Island—as we know it—or Quakers—as we know them—existed; the United Colonies formed in 1643 before Williams returned from London with Rhode Island’s Parliamentary Patent and Quakers did not begin to form a cohesive sect until the early 1650s. Neal Dugre points out that the United Colonies initially contemplated inviting the separate plantations of Aquidneck and Providence to join the alliance, especially since their membership in the United Colonies would have been conditioned upon a prohibition against member colonies combining with another; preventing Providence and Aquidneck from forming a united government would have served their geopolitical interests well. However, Rhode Island’s patent came around the same time that ambitions turned from “warding off a potential Narragansett assault” to “[perfecting] the Puritan commonwealth” (Dugre, “Repairing the Breach: Puritan Expansion, Commonwealth Formation, and the Origins of the United Colonies in New England, 1630-1643,” *NEQ* 91, No. 3 (Sept. 2018): 412). Dugre contends that the religious and political motivations for Rhode Island’s exclusion must be taken together as equally important, with neither trumping the other. Rhode Island, in turn, had little geopolitical motivation to join the United Colonies at that time, as their land claims conflicted with those of Connecticut and Massachusetts and joining would likely entail concessions to those claims.



### “Glory to the English and Protestant Name”

As the metadata show, the contest between Protestantism and Catholicism in the early modern world appears to have preoccupied Williams above all other issues. Quakers not only could not claim martyrdom, they could not claim Protestantism, and their very existence undermined it.

Williams saw Quakers’ Inner Light and papal infallibility as part of the same problem of self-revelation. In his address directly “to the People called Quakers” in the front matter, he writes, “that as the Iesuites pretend to deifie the Pope, but it is known, the end is to deifie themselves under the cloak of the Popes Name: so Satan pretends to exalt and deifie you.”<sup>196</sup> He takes this a step further in the propositions that he circulated before the debates at Newport and Providence. Proposition ten contends that “the Popes of Rome doe not swell with, and exercise a greater Pride, then the Quakers Spirit hath exprest.”<sup>197</sup> During the first day of debates in Newport, while making the case that Quakers, like Catholics, were not beholden to scripture, “I told them God was little beholding to the Pope and the Quakers for their humble Reverence and great Affection to his holy Letters, Declarations and Proclamations. The Pope had his Infallibility as well as they, his immediate Inspirations as well as they.”<sup>198</sup> On the third day of debates, in response to the Quaker assertion that they “know all things” (1 John 2:20), Williams rebutted that the passage was not to be taken literally, and that “the Most Holy, Omniscient, and Eternal Iehovah knows that the Pope and his Purgatory, the Quakers and

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<sup>196</sup> p. iv-v. The front matter pages are unnumbered, and so the imposition of pagination for the sake of citation is my own.

<sup>197</sup> p. 4-5.

<sup>198</sup> p. 49.

their Omniscency are but Childrens and Frantick Persons Dreams and Phantasies.”<sup>199</sup>

This particular point of contention went on for quite a while that day, with Williams eventually drawing in comparisons to Judaism: “The Papists set up the Pope as the only infallible Judg & Interpreter in all Questions about the Scriptures and the Jews make their Rabbies as so many Popes also.”<sup>200</sup> On the final day of the Newport debates, he returned to this point again: “The Quakers are Papists in that Spirit of Infallibility which they arrogate to themselves... yea, all men have this Spirit, and need no Teacher.”<sup>201</sup>

The aspect of Quaker theology that perhaps most threatened Protestant hegemony was its insistence on self-knowledge. As Morgan argues, Williams believed that just as God had sent His son as a living, breathing man that people could see and touch, other spiritual truths needed outside corroboration.<sup>202</sup> Miller, however, saw a further implication: “Once the typological insight is granted, the Bible becomes an instrument for shattering of self-esteem.”<sup>203</sup> As with Anne Hutchinson and her followers, Quakers expected those around them to believe their own self-reported internal revelation that was inherently unverifiable externally.<sup>204</sup> This represented a level of individualism that was as threatening in Rhode Island as it was in the rest of the English Atlantic. As covered in chapter one of this dissertation, the reliance on self-reporting for religious exemptions for military service eventually came under scrutiny for its potential for abuse, as it had in

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<sup>199</sup> p. 130. At this juncture Williams also argues that some of their hyper-literal interpretations of Scripture amount to twisting the original meaning of the text and its context, and therefore actually stray further from Scripture in the attempt to get as close to it as possible.

<sup>200</sup> p. 138.

<sup>201</sup> p. 203-204.

<sup>202</sup> Morgan, p. 58.

<sup>203</sup> Miller, p. 28.

<sup>204</sup> Cyclone Covey notes that “Antinomianism is better understood when we realize that it tended to develop into Quakerism,” and indeed, significant overlap took place (Covey, *The Gentle Radical: A Biography of Roger Williams* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 170).

England for the refusal to take oaths. In observing that Williams came back to this point of self-revelation repeatedly, it is critical to understand this in the context of one of the most prominent criticisms of freedom of conscience in the early modern English Atlantic world: that if all people were free to follow their own conscience, they were free to believe, and do, literally anything. Faithful Catholics, of course, must defer to the Pope, but the infallibility of the Pope as an individual led to the same conundrum, in Williams' view; each Quaker acted as their own Pope.

Williams position on the untrustworthy nature of internal revelation also extended to the relationship between religion and the law. Williams gave his position against "arbitrary" government, to which a Quaker asked him if he spoke against a government ruled by force, contending, "We are for righteous Government, and righteous Lawes, we are not for any to rule by Force." Williams clarified that "there could be no Government in the world without the Sword" and did not argue against a government ruled by force. By arbitrary, he meant it in the sense of "Arbitrium which signified Will or pleasure." He argued "that Persons immediately speaking from God, it was impertinent and profane to clog and cumber them with Lawes, for the Voice of God (the Law of all Laws) proceeded out of their mouth, then which there could be none more Just, more Wise, more Holy."<sup>205</sup> Williams argued this in the context of arguing that Quakerism could lead Quakers to flout "Mens laws." Edmundson countered that in practice, Quakers were "peaceable and quiet and yielding to Magistrates." All three of his "Antagonists joyntly bid me shew when any of the Quakers had done so: I Answ. They spake not to the point, &c. for I did not charge them to have done so, but that their Spirit tended to it."<sup>206</sup> Quaker's individualistic

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<sup>205</sup> p. 312-313.

<sup>206</sup> p. 314.

theology posed a theoretical, existential threat to order. Moreover, he saw a particular danger in investing political power in individuals whose religious truth, revealed only to them, could not be questioned.

From Williams' perspective, Quakers were not true Protestants not only in theology, but in ecclesiastical lineage. He focused on how young the sect was and the absurdity of their attempts to retrofit the history of Christianity to serve their own purposes. "Although they pretend that Moses and David and Habbacouck and Daniel were Quakers," he traces their lineage to a more recent and sinister origin. Ironically, as he acknowledges, the Protestant Reformation was only "about 150 years since" at that time and many early modern Catholics discredited Protestantism for its youth. However, he contended while "our gallant fore-Fathers in Germany" resurrected true Christianity during the Reformation, Quakers descended from sects that "Satan raised up about the Protestant Reformation from the ruins and rubbish of the old Manicheans and Gnosticks" from the third and fourth centuries. Although Catholicism mostly "swallowed up" these sects long before the Reformation, he contends that they survived into the seventeenth century as Grindeltonians and Nicholaitans and posits them as the most immediate spiritual and ecclesiastical ancestors to Quakers. Although he compared Quaker theology to Catholicism, here we see him argue that they were neither Catholic nor Protestant, but another altogether separate abomination.<sup>207</sup> Returning to Morgan's musing that projection may have played a significant role in Williams' ire, Williams seems to be employing similar criticisms to Quakers that Catholics applied to Protestants writ large. Again, a psychohistory of Williams is not my aim. Instead, I argue that

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<sup>207</sup> p. 41-43.

Williams applied the criticisms of Protestantism writ large to this particular Protestant sect because discrediting Quakers could potentially protect more legitimate Protestants from similar criticism. Excising a sect that drew particular attention for its youth could potentially deflect the same criticism for Baptists, Congregationalists, and others.

Paying due attention to the text's aim in defending Protestantism necessitates analysis of the role of gender. "Woman" and "women" appear at least one hundred and twenty-four times, mostly referencing controversial instances of Quaker women's nudity in public.<sup>208</sup> There are also stray mentions of "manly," "manlike," and "effeminate," with Protestantism representing the former, Quakers representing the latter. The Protestant Reformation triggered significant shifts in both the lives of women and attitudes about women. The deemphasis on the Virgin Mary and saints, including women saints, gave women fewer spiritual role models and made the spiritual landscape decidedly more masculine. The closing of convents removed exclusively women's spaces where they could thrive outside of marriage and motherhood. For reformers, monasteries could be just as dangerous as convents; with the Reformation's criticisms of clerical celibacy and promotion of clerical marriage came a reverence for marriage as a means of properly ordering the roles of both men and women.<sup>209</sup> At the same time, the emphasis on lay literacy benefitted women as well as men.<sup>210</sup> Williams' vision of an orderly Protestant

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<sup>208</sup> For more on instances of Quakers' public nudity, see Katherine Romack, "'For This Is the Naked Truth': The Early Quakers and Going Naked As a Sign," *The American Journal of Semiotics* 27, No. 1-4 (2011): 203-231; Jacques Tual, "Friends on the Fringe: A Further Assessment of Nude Prophesying in Early Quakerism" in Tsuchiya, K. (ed.), *Dissent and Marginality: Studies in Literature and Religion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), pp. 17-29.

<sup>209</sup> Merry E. Wiesner, "Beyond Women and the Family: Towards a Gender Analysis of the Reformation," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 18, No. 3 (Autumn, 1987): 313. For more on gender in the Protestant Reformation, see Julie Chappell and K. Kramer, eds., *Women During the English Reformation: Renegotiating Gender and Religious Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>210</sup> See E. Jennifer Monaghan, "Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England," *American Quarterly* 40, No. 1 Special Issue: Reading America (March 1988): 18-41. With a focus on the medieval period and the

empire seems focused on the first half of the equation: the Reformation had returned women to their proper obedient role from the excesses of feminine spirituality. Quaker women preaching, and especially going naked in public, threatened this critical intervention of the Protestant Reformation.

Williams also contended that Quaker women's behavior upended racial as well as gender hierarchies. The word "Indian" appears at least twenty-three times in *George Fox*, most mentions comparing Quaker behavior, especially going naked, to that of Native Americans' "barbarous" behavior (variations of which appear at least thirty-two times).<sup>211</sup> When John Stubs defended Quaker women going naked by pointing out that God commanded the prophet Isaiah to go naked, Williams responded that "the difference of Nakedness of Mankind and Womankind is very great in all nations." Even "Barbarians themselves, who though they suffer their Male Children to go naked till about seven years old, yet cover they their Females from birth."<sup>212</sup> Quaker women's nudity made them even more uncivilized than the meanest "barbarians." These assertions seem contrary to Williams' contention in his publication *Key into the Language of America*—part language dictionary, part argument against the portrayal of Native Americans as "savage." Yet at the same time, that Quakers' behaviors were even less civilized reinforced the idea that Christianity, or pretention to it, was not the be all and end all of what constituted the civilized.

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Reformation, Judith Bennett advocates for analysis beyond whether conditions became "better" or "worse" for women with these changes (see chapter four, "Patriarchal Equilibrium" in Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Penn, 2006), pp. 54-81.)

<sup>211</sup> Carla Pestana also highlights Williams' unfavorable comparisons of Quaker behavior to that of Native Americans (Pestana, "The City upon a Hill under Siege: The Puritan Perception of the Quaker Threat to Massachusetts Bay, 1656-1661," *NEQ* 56, no. 3 (Sept. 1983), pp. 337-38).

<sup>212</sup> p. 62.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, Quakers constituted a grave threat to the Protestant project of New England and Williams expressed his wish for Rhode Island to bolster it. He concludes his address to Charles II in the front matter of *George Fox* by expressing his wish for New England to serve as “a Glory to the English and Protestant Name: and if the most High please, Old and New-England may flourish when the Pope and Mahomet, Rome and Constantinople are in their Ashes.”<sup>213</sup> Here Williams frames Rhode Island as a participant alongside the rest of New England, including Massachusetts, in building an English Protestant presence that forwarded the global Protestant project. Rhode Island and Massachusetts may have butted heads in geopolitical control of the region, and indeed, even over the issue of Quaker settlement in the region. However, both colonies held defending Protestantism as a high priority, and, ironically against our typical narratives of seventeenth-century New England, Rhode Island held it even higher.

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<sup>213</sup> p. ii.

## Chapter IV

### Conjuring Samuel Gorton's Ghost: Invoking the Past to Understand the Present in Early Eighteenth-Century Rhode Island

The year is 1728. Significant transformations took place in Rhode Island during the fifty-six years since Roger Williams' debates with Quakers in Newport and Providence in 1672, not least of them religious. According to John Callender's contemporary knowledge in his *Historical Discourse on the Civil and Religious Affairs of the Colony of Rhode-Island*, the colony had "no less than *twenty five distinct Societies*, or worshipping Assemblies of Christians," in addition to the Jewish congregation which still did not have a synagogue. On mainland Rhode Island, Callender claimed that there were eight Baptist churches, seven Quaker meetinghouses, four Anglican churches, and three "*Presbyterian or Congregational Churches*." Some of these denominations were well established, and some were newcomers. Baptist churches accounted for some of the first churches in Rhode Island, the Jewish congregation likely dated to the 1650s, and Quakers became a significant presence shortly after. The Anglicans and Congregationalists, however, were more recent arrivals. Rhode Islanders, with the aid and encouragement of Massachusetts Congregationalists, established Congregational churches in 1695, 1720, and 1728, respectively.<sup>214</sup> The first of the Anglican churches came in the early eighteenth

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<sup>214</sup> John Callender, *An Historical Discourse on the Civil and Religious Affairs of the Colony of Rhode-Island* (Boston: S. Kneeland and T. Green, 1739), pp. 66-68. Alison G. Olson's estimates for eighteenth-century Rhode Island churches give a slightly different picture. Olson claims that Baptists accounted for fifty-six percent of all churches in Rhode Island and that fifty-six percent of all Rhode Island towns only had one choice of church (presumably Baptist). Olson also claims that most non-Baptists in Rhode Island were concentrated in Newport and Providence, which was certainly true for Anglicans, Congregationalists, and Jews. However, if Quaker meetings were as dispersed as Callender understood at the time, that would mean that the rural landscape of Rhode Island was co-dominant between Baptists and Quakers. However, both Olson and Callender acknowledge that in formal, irregular, or theologically ambiguous gatherings in rural Rhode Island confound attempts to enumerate places of worship by denomination. Olson does not cite Callender as a source and relies almost exclusively on secondary sources, though in fairness, she employs well-vetted and respected nineteenth and twentieth-century compilations of church histories and town histories, and Callender gives us no indication of where his figures come from. If Olson's estimates are more correct than Callender's, Callender's estimates are still valuable in that that was the vision of Rhode Island's religious demographics available to most Rhode Islanders at the time. Alison G. Olson, "Rhode



century, distinct from the parallel rise of Anglicanism in Massachusetts in that their founding in Rhode Island was largely spearheaded by Huguenots, who saw in Anglicanism a secure pool of resources from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) and the promise of cultural assimilation. The arrival of the SPG in Rhode Island also increased efforts to convert Native Americans, which Williams and other founders saw as a low priority in the seventeenth century, despite language encouraging it in the 1663 royal charter. In 1727, “the General Assembly of Rhode Island—at the request of the Narragansett sachem Charles Augustus Ninigret—carved out twenty acres of Narragansett land in Westerly” for an Anglican church, ministered, also at Ninigret’s request, by SPG minister James McSparran.<sup>215</sup> The first Great Awakening, as New England’s surge of evangelical revivalism would come to be called, was only in its embryonic stages in 1728; Sarah Haggar, later Sarah Osborn, who would become famous for her evangelical revival leadership in Newport, was only fourteen years old.<sup>216</sup>

Rhode Island as an English colony also became a more coherent and permanent space during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, which allowed for a more coherent and permanent Rhode Island identity for English colonists. The major geopolitical struggles of the English colony’s sovereignty and borders were largely over; Massachusetts and Connecticut would only engage in a few minor border disputes. After a century of land purchases by the English from the Narragansett, the Narragansett now

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Island, Massachusetts, and the Question of Religious Diversity in Colonial New England,” *NEQ* 65, no. 1 (March 1992): 93-116.

<sup>215</sup> Linford D. Fisher, *The Indian Great Awakening: Religion and the Shaping of Native Cultures in Early America* (Oxford, 2012), p. 45.

<sup>216</sup> Sarah Osborn led a religious revival in Newport, with meetings at her home that included enslaved people. In *Sarah Osborn’s World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in America* (Yale, 2013), Catherine A. Brekus positions Osborn’s life experiences, theology, and revival activity in the context of a turn in evangelicalism that granted greater authority to direct, empirical experience.

primarily lived in the southwest of the colony. Rhode Island now numbered, by Callender's contemporary estimate, roughly seventeen thousand people: about fifteen thousand of them English, about a thousand of them Native Americans, and about sixteen hundred of them Black.<sup>217</sup> After a century of "struggling to stay on the map," by the third decade of the eighteenth century, English Rhode Islanders, as Sydney James put it, settled into "a true patriotism" for the colony that had not existed before.<sup>218</sup>

Rhode Island experienced significant economic growth through its two urban ports, Newport and Providence.<sup>219</sup> Newport, once a town only trading "a little *Corn* and *Pork* and *Tobacco*," was now a thriving port with "above one Hundred Sail of Vessels belonging to this *Town*, besides what belong to the *rest of the Colony*," Callender wrote. Rhode Islanders, like many New Englanders, hoped that "as we increase in Numbers and Riches, we may not increase in Sin and Wickedness."<sup>220</sup> Primarily driving this increased commercial activity was participation in the transatlantic slave trade. In the eighteenth century, "Rhode Islanders... trafficked more than 60 percent of all North American trade in African slaves." By the 1750s, ten percent of all Rhode Islanders were enslaved, double the percentage of all northern colonies, and quintuple the percentage of Massachusetts.<sup>221</sup> In this way, Rhode Island's stark distinction from Massachusetts in its

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<sup>217</sup> Callender, p. 40.

<sup>218</sup> Sydney James, *Rhode Island: A History* (New York: Scribner, 1975), p. 10.

<sup>219</sup> For more on the economic growth of Newport and Providence see Lynne Withey, *Urban Growth in Colonial Rhode Island* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984). As Carl Bridenbaugh argues in *Fat Mutton and Liberty of Conscience: Society in Rhode Island, 1636-1690* (Brown, 1974), many of the earliest English colonists in Rhode Island were drawn there by economic and agricultural, rather than religious, factors, but only with a substantial English population and connections to the slave trade could those economic ambitions transform Newport, and to a lesser extent, Providence, into significant North American port cities.

<sup>220</sup> Callender, p. 41.

<sup>221</sup> Christy Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island* (NYU, 2016), p. 4. More granular breakdowns of these numbers can be found in her dissertation (Clark-Pujara, "Slavery, Emancipation, and Black Freedom in Rhode Island, 1752-1842," Dissertation, University of Iowa, 2009, pp. 36, 41). However, how this relationship to slavery translated to Rhode Island's religious landscape is beyond the scope of this dissertation. For

participation in the trade of enslaved people and the degree of enslavement in the colony itself made it unique in New England. At the same time, it made Rhode more similar to the rest of the British Atlantic than Massachusetts and more connected in trade. Slavery, then, simultaneously made Rhode Island more unique and more common.

With increased commercial activity came more merchants, more tradespeople, and eventually, a printer. The previous year, tallow chandler John Franklin may have influenced the decision of his brother, James, the printer of Boston's controversial and formally suppressed *New-England Courant*, to find refuge in Rhode Island, joining that storied cohort of English colonists who fled to Rhode Island to escape persecution in Massachusetts. The *Courant* printed far more than simply the news from around the Atlantic as the two preceding Boston papers had. It included opinion and commentary that incensed the Massachusetts elite, first causing controversy in opposing smallpox inoculation in the city. The *Courant's* trajectory followed the changing tastes in early American newspaper readership that increasingly craved creative and opinionated letters, essays, and verse in addition to news. Even before Franklin brought his press to Rhode Island, the first in the colony, Rhode Islanders craved fresh print culture so much that they were reading, and in at least one known case, immediately responding to, the Silence Dogood letters of James' younger brother Benjamin.<sup>222</sup> James was also publishing incendiary political tracts and theological essays and pamphlets, at least one of them advertised as sold at the shop of the aptly-named J. Rhodes in Newport. In January 1723,

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more on New England slavery, see Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (New York: Norton, 2016).

<sup>222</sup> In the July 2-9, 1722 issue of the *Courant*, a Rhode Islander responded to a Silence Dogood letter published in the June 18-25 issue, demonstrating that Rhode Islanders were reading the *Courant*. The Rhode Islander dated their response 25 June, indicating that they received new issues quickly.

Franklin was arrested for libel, and Magistrates ordered that he was forbidden “to print or Publish the New England Courant, or any other Pamphlet or Paper of the like Nature.”

The paper continued for another three years under Benjamin’s name. Benjamin eventually fled, first to New York, then to Philadelphia. In 1727, Massachusetts revoked James’ printing license; he and his wife Ann fled to Newport. They would go on to print the *Rhode-Island Almanack* and Rhode Island’s first, albeit short-lived, newspaper, the *Rhode Island Gazette*.<sup>223</sup>

One of the Franklins’ early Newport publications has almost entirely escaped scholarly notice. In 1728, Franklin printed a broadside of an anonymously written poem entitled *Mr. Samuel Gorton’s Ghost*. In it, the ghost of Samuel Gorton, a controversial religious and political figure in Rhode Island’s seventeenth-century history who passed away in 1677, visits the speaker in a dream. Gorton’s ghost condemns a certain “Presbyterian” sect that seeks to turn a profit from their adherents and sow division in the process.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> See p. 59, n. 98 for rationale for considering James and Ann Franklin as co-printers. The Franklins printed *The Rhode Island Gazette* between October 1732 and March 1733. While this was, in fact, Rhode Island’s first paper, after publication stopped in 1733, another paper, the *Newport Mercury*, would not appear until 1758. The *Newport Mercury* was Rhode Island’s second newspaper, but some historians refer to it as Rhode Island’s true first newspaper not just because of its extended continuous run into the mid nineteenth century, but also because it contained more of the kind of content one typically associates with an eighteenth-century newspaper. The *Gazette* did mostly print foreign dispatches and little else, but that was not dissimilar to other 1730s newspapers. Also very typical of 1730s North American newspapers, the *Gazette* contained advertisements; its very first advertisement was for a runaway enslaved person.

<sup>224</sup> “Mr. Samuel Gorton’s Ghost: Or, The Spirit of Persecution Represented in the Similitude of a Dream.” Newport, RI: James Franklin, 1728, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA. The first appearance of this broadside in any Rhode Island bibliography was in John Eliot Alden, ed., *Rhode Island Imprints, 1727-1800* (New York: Bibliographical Society of America, 1949). The following also appears in an address delivered March 1936: “There were several broadsides from Franklin’s press, of which at least four—two of them in verse—have been preserved” (Clarence Saunders Brigham, “James Franklin and the Beginnings of Printing in Rhode Island,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Third Series, vol. 65 (Oct. 1932-May 1936): 543). The titles of the broadsides are not named, but this potentially indicates that *Mr. Samuel Gorton’s Ghost* was known by that time. Two original copies are held by the Rhode Island Historical Society and the American Antiquarian Society, the copy of the latter archive digitized. The only scholarly analysis that exists of this broadside is in the footnote of a dissertation that highlights it as one example of invoking “the specter of an early American dissenter” in fiction prior to Nathaniel Hawthorne. The footnote reads: “By the by, Nathaniel Hawthorne was apparently not the first figure in American

This neglected broadside, analyzed against Callender's observations, contributes to historians' understanding of how Rhode Islanders conceptualized the dramatic religious and economic changes taking place in the eighteenth century against their own history, drawing from seventeenth-century Rhode Island history to comment on the local implications of Atlantic phenomena. *Gorton's Ghost* and Callender's *Historical Discourse* demonstrate that some Rhode Islanders saw the theological differences that undergirded seventeenth-century religious conflict in New England as inconsequential, which served the interests of the developing broad Protestant coalition in early eighteenth-century New England. These two sources also demonstrate that many Rhode Islanders fretted over the economic changes taking place in the colony and the potential for profit-seeking to corrupt individuals and denominations. Seventeenth-century Rhode Island used two methods to enforce Protestant hegemony: neutralizing radicalism at home and appealing to broader transatlantic Protestantism. Similarly, early to mid-eighteenth-century Rhode Island Protestant hegemony traveled in two directions, outbound and inbound. In the outbound direction, the influences of print, trade, and travel connected Rhode Island to broader transatlantic forces, especially in relation to Anglicanism and Anglican missionary activity. In the inbound direction, Rhode Islanders attempted to make sense of the colony's tolerant past and present religious diversity.

While we can only conjecture about the interests and intentions of the anonymous author of the broadside, what we know about Callender productively illuminates the

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literary history to invoke the specter of an early American dissenter in his fictional writing. After relocating to Rhode Island, James Franklin printed a broadside entitled *Mr. Samuel Gorton's Ghost: Or, the Spirit of Persecution Represented in the Similitude of a Dream* (1728) at his press at Tillinghast's Wharf in Newport." (Grantland S. Rice, "The Transformation of Authorship in America," Dissertation, Brandeis University, 1994, p. 67, n. 33). Unless there are citations I have not found in my research, this means that this broadside has never been subject to any substantial scholarly analysis beyond calling attention to this literary precedent.

stakes of both his work and the broadside. Born in Swansea, Massachusetts in 1706 and raised in Boston, John Callender, Jr. was the son of a merchant, John Callender, Sr., grandson of Baptist minister Ellis Callender, and nephew to Elisha Callender, a Harvard graduate and Baptist minister ordained by Increase and Cotton Mather in a monumental display of Congregational and Baptist solidarity. Callender was raised in Boston and a Harvard graduate himself, having attended on a scholarship for Baptist students, and became a Baptist minister in both Massachusetts and Rhode Island. He originally delivered his *Historical Discourse* as a sermon to commemorate the centennial of English settlement along Narragansett Bay.<sup>225</sup> Callender's framing of Rhode Island history both downplayed the importance of theological disagreements in New England's past and pointed to how bolstering Protestant diversity, and downplaying the significance of granular theological differences, benefitted Protestantism more broadly. Taking Rhode Island's colonial history as evidence, Callender contended that the influence of religion on government thrived in conditions of liberty of conscience—not in spite of it, but nourished by it.

Callender's perspective is valuable as one representing the ways in which Massachusetts and Rhode Island's religious converged in the eighteenth century. With Massachusetts' adoption of greater religious toleration and liberty of conscience, greater limits to civil rights on the basis of religion in Rhode Island as covered in chapter one, a parallel but simultaneous turn to Anglicanism in both colonies, and both colonies' denominations dedicating more of their attention and resources to continental and Atlantic religious networks, Massachusetts and Rhode Island became more religiously

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<sup>225</sup> Jeffrey Alan Waldrop, "Religious Toleration in Puritan New England: the Contribution of John Callender (1706-1748)," Fuller Theological Seminary, Center for Advanced Theological Study, 2012, pp. 147-153.

alike than not.<sup>226</sup> Olson notes that “by the 1730s both colonies had compromised their original positions,” and even contends that if either colony could be said to grant its colonists greater variety in choosing a church, it was Massachusetts—albeit by a slim margin.<sup>227</sup> This phenomenon was not limited to New England. As Chris Beneke points out, “By the 1730s, major American dissenting groups across most of the colonies had gained the right to worship privately and to direct their tax payments toward the support of their own ministers.”<sup>228</sup>

As Massachusetts and Rhode Island religious landscapes came to resemble each other more closely, two camps of Baptists within Rhode Island grew apart. In the early eighteenth century, urban, educated, five-principle Baptists’ interests aligned more with Congregationalists and Anglicans than with their fellow Baptists who adhered to the six principles, including laying of the hands, and were generally more rural and less educated.<sup>229</sup> Callender’s background renders it rather obvious that he would align with urban and educated interests. At the same time, Callender’s Newport congregation

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<sup>226</sup> Some legal and political developments in late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century Massachusetts paved the way for greater toleration and liberty of conscience. As covered in chapter 3, the Crown first enforced greater toleration in Massachusetts through Charles II’s 1661 intervention in Quaker executions. The Toleration Act of 1689, coupled with Massachusetts’ new royal charter from William and Mary in 1692 that made liberty of conscience explicit, helped Massachusetts catch up with Rhode Island. Additionally, as Olson highlights, Anglicans, Quakers, and Baptists were largely exempt from paying taxes to the Congregational church in Massachusetts, though this differed from town to town, as highlighted in chapter 5.

<sup>227</sup> Olson, pp. 93.

<sup>228</sup> *Beyond Toleration*, p. 5.

<sup>229</sup> Five-principle Baptists adhered to: 1) adult baptism, 2) repentance, 3) salvation by faith, 4) universal resurrection, and 5) the final judgment, while six-principle Baptists held the additional principle of “laying of the hands” during ceremonies such as baptism and ordination. For more detailed explanations of the theological and liturgical differences among Baptists, see James C. Blaylock, *Baptist Groups in America* (Jacksonville, TX: Baptist Missionary Association Theological Seminary, 2005). Six-Principle Baptist theology and history is covered on pp. 38-39.

contained both five and six-principle adherents, which was tolerated so long as disagreements did not become aggressive or mean-spirited.<sup>230</sup>

Jeffrey Alan Waldrop argues that Callender intended his *Historical Discourse* to smooth over some infighting between Congregationalists and Baptists.<sup>231</sup> *Gorton's Ghost*, on the other hand, singles out a sect as guilty of poisoning the entire Rhode Island religious landscape and warns the reader that they must be prevented from getting too much leverage in the colony. Yet Callender and the anonymous author of *Gorton's Ghost* were in agreement that religious conflicts in seventeenth-century New England were unfortunate and the precise theology implicated in the conflicts should be considered irrelevant. They were also in agreement that Rhode Island's eighteenth-century economic boom was cause for concern—to Callender, for individual congregants, to the author of *Gorton's Ghost*, for an entire sect.

### **James and Ann Franklin's Newport**

*Mr. Samuel Gorton's Ghost* emerged in the second year of the Franklins' printing career in Newport. Aside from the *Rhode Island Almanack*, the handful of publications from the Franklins' first two years in Newport were mostly religious in nature. In 1727 they printed John Hammet's *Vindication and Relation* of his conversion from Baptist to Quaker. In 1728 they printed an ordination sermon by pastor John Adams, an anonymous broadside entitled *The Ardent Desire, and Sincere Cry, of a true Believer in Jesus Christ*, James Honeyman's *Faults on All Sides* reflecting on various theological errors of

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<sup>230</sup> Jeffrey Alan Waldrop, "Religious Toleration in Puritan New England: the Contribution of John Callender (1706-1748)," Fuller Theological Seminary, Center for Advanced Theological Study, 2012, pp. 153-179.

<sup>231</sup> Waldrop, *The Emergence of Religious Toleration in Eighteenth-Century New England: Baptists, Congregationalists, and the Contribution of John Callender (1706-1748)* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), p. 5.



multiple denominations, a sermon preached by Boston Congregationalist John Webb, and another broadside by Daniel White. Even before arriving in Newport, the Franklins printed a text to be sold by a J. Rhodes in Newport in 1721.<sup>232</sup> *A Looking-Glass for Elder Clarke* spelled out the reasons for several members of the Newport Baptist Church for leaving.

The Franklins established themselves as a center of Rhode Island religious exchanges in print. In the days of Samuel Gorton and Roger Williams, the London press largely carried discourse over Rhode Island religious conflict. Boston, then, carried some of it in Williams' publication of *George Fox Digg'd Out of his Burrowes* and in the printing of *Looking-Glass* in Boston. With the Franklins' earliest publications in the colony, they moved the center of Rhode Island religious discourse in print to Newport.

### **The Collapse of Seventeenth-Century Sectarianism**

As I lay sleeping on my Bed  
I dream'd of *Gorton* that is dead,  
Who persecuted was of old,  
For the Opinion he did hold.

This first stanza concisely communicates what Gorton represents in the poem: a founder revered for enduring religious persecution, while treating the exact differences in theology he espoused, and his geopolitical conflicts, as irrelevant. Here the speaker takes a firm stance that Gorton was persecuted for his beliefs, not his behavior. Of the thirty-three stanzas of the poem, four of them are dedicated entirely to decrying persecution,

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<sup>232</sup> William Claggett, *A Looking-Glass for Elder Clarke...* (Boston: James Franklin for J. Rhodes, 1721). The title page indicates that copies were "to be sold by J. Rhodes, shop-keeper in Newport on Rhode-Island, in New-England."

pointing out, as Roger Williams did, that it “never yet could change the heart” and that in the seventeenth century it parted people from their communities as “Husband parted from the Wife.” The “Opinion he did hold” itself is not expounded upon in the poem, indicating that the author only saw it as relevant to discuss that he was persecuted for holding unorthodox beliefs and implying, by virtue of exclusion, the irrelevance of their content.<sup>233</sup> This was part of a broader trend in New England and Rhode Island in particular; Ezra Stiles, whom Douglas Winiarski called a “cosmopolitan Protestant,” came to believe that “all New England churches were in ‘Essence true Churches.’”<sup>234</sup>

Appreciating the import of an early eighteenth-century diminution of the religious and geopolitical features of Gorton’s disputes in favor of a focus on persecution itself necessitates unpacking his theological and geopolitical disputes in the seventeenth century. Gorton arrived in Boston in 1637. After settling in Plymouth, “his chief complaints were that the magistrates disregarded the common law of England” and that their trials were illegitimate.<sup>235</sup> Plymouth banished him in December 1638; he arrived in Pocasset on Aquidneck Island, just as the feud between William Coddington and Anne Hutchinson covered in chapters one and two, which would lead to Coddington’s settlement of Newport, was coming to a fever pitch. Gorton sided with Hutchinson and her followers; his influence on the Civil Compact that established Portsmouth is apparent

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<sup>233</sup> With the rise of social history in the late twentieth century, historians of early American religion began to favor “secular” explanations of religious conflict, perhaps especially in seventeenth-century New England. To use one of the most well-known examples, the Salem witch crisis could be about misogyny, mass hysteria, hallucinogens, or frontier anxieties, without any specific attention to puritan theology or beliefs about witchcraft. Historians have pushed back on this development, not only because taking historical people’s beliefs seriously has inherent value, but also because theology informed those “secular” concerns. But in this broadside we see that even as early as the eighteenth century, the theological disputes of the seventeenth appeared absurd, containing little value on their own.

<sup>234</sup> Douglas Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: UNC for the Omohundro Institute, 2017), pp. 488-89.

<sup>235</sup> Howard Millar Chapin, Introduction, *Hypocrisie Unmasked by Edward Winslow 1646* (Providence: The Club for Colonial Reprints, 1916), p. vii.

in its emphasis on their English subjecthood and allegiance to the Crown. When the island came under one government in 1641 with Coddington elected governor, Gorton was tried for “a dispute involving a servant in his household” and Gorton insisted that the court was extralegal, calling the justices “just asses.”<sup>236</sup> Both Coddington and Gorton resorted to shouting to all present, “all you that own the king, carry him away to prison.”<sup>237</sup> Gorton was exiled from the island and, by some accounts, whipped.<sup>238</sup>

Gorton relocated to Providence with roughly half a dozen families of followers. Both his theology and his criticism of Providence’s lack of a charter greatly annoyed Williams. “Master Gorton,” he wrote, “having foully abused both high and low at Aquedneck, is now bewitching and bemadding poor Providence.” William Arnold requested Gorton and his followers be removed. On November 15, 1641, a riot broke out in Providence; few details of the events of this riot survive, but its outcome was the formation of three parties: Gorton and his allies who claimed that Providence had no legitimacy without a charter, Williams and his allies who attempted to maintain law and order under the colonist-established government, and Arnold and his allies, among them William Harris, who held exclusive rights to the Pawtuxet purchase per a decision in October 1638. The Arnold faction seceded from Providence and formally declared their submission to Massachusetts on September 8, 1642.

The Gortonists purchased Shawomet from sachem Miantonomi in early January, 1642/43.<sup>239</sup> However, the following September, sachem Pomham claimed that Shawomet

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<sup>236</sup> Jonathan Beecher Field, *Errands into the Metropolis: New England Dissidents in Revolutionary London* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth, 2012), p. 51.

<sup>237</sup> Chapin, p. viii.

<sup>238</sup> Beecher Field, p. 51.

<sup>239</sup> Chapin, p. ix.

belonged to him and that Miantonomi had no right to sell it. Pomham went to Massachusetts to address this and Massachusetts asked Gorton and the other Shawomet settlers to defend their claim. The Gortonists dismissed Pomham's claim and "denied that Massachusetts had any jurisdiction in Shawomet. They were English subjects, and only answerable to an English court."<sup>240</sup> Massachusetts sent troops to secure Shawomet for Massachusetts by force. They laid siege to a blockhouse that Gorton and a few other settlers occupied. Surrounded, without enough firepower to fight their way out, they surrendered a few days later.<sup>241</sup>

Although geopolitical concerns were at the heart of Gorton's controversy, so too was theology. Hauled before the Massachusetts General Court, their trial focused more on theology than on their conflicting land claims. Gorton "argued for the essential divinity in all human beings, a divinity that was defined by the Holy Spirit's presence and that precluded any arbitrary distinctions (be they religious or political) between saints and sinner." Conversion entailed "full apprehension of this indwelling divinity and a willingness to follow its dictates against human authority."<sup>242</sup> This was dangerously close to the self-revelation that animated antinomians and Quakers. The Court sentenced them to hard labor in irons. A combination of fear of being reprimanded by London for religious persecution, public backlash against their sentences in Massachusetts, and the fact that Gortonists continued to evangelize even while in irons, a situation "at least as onerous for captor as for captive," led the Court to order their release in early 1644.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Warren, 134.

<sup>241</sup> Chapin, p. x.

<sup>242</sup> Philip F. Gura, "The Radical Ideology of Samuel Gorton: New Light on the Relation of English to American Puritanism," *WMQ* 36, no. 1 (Jan. 1979), p. 86.

<sup>243</sup> Beecher Field, p. 51.

They were banished from Massachusetts, including Shawomet, which the colony still claimed, “on pain of death.”<sup>244</sup> Gorton travelled to London to secure the rights to Shawomet and was successful; Gortonists renamed the settlement Warwick in honor of the Earl of Warwick of the Committee for Foreign Plantations.

The extent to which Gorton’s religion or his geopolitical claims caused more grief in the seventeenth century is disputed. Despite coming into political and theological conflict with Williams, Gorton was present at, and even interjected in, the Quaker debates, supporting Williams against his opponents.<sup>245</sup> The publication of this broadside suggests that at least some eighteenth-century Rhode Islanders best remembered him for the religious controversy that he stirred and saw it as his primary legacy. Philip F. Gura notes that, while Gorton’s theology was roundly criticized for its radicalism and fanaticism at the time, historians tend to downplay his radicalism by pointing out its relative closeness to most of puritanism.<sup>246</sup>

While fair to say that distinctions between circles of puritanism seem minute to the twentieth or twenty-first-century historian, passages from the poem indicate an early eighteenth-century turn in seeing the religious disputes of the previous century as inconsequential. This framing of Gorton’s beliefs in the poem matched opinions espoused by other contemporary Rhode Islanders. By the early eighteenth century, the theological divisions that rent seventeenth-century New England seemed insignificant. While reflecting on the free grace controversy, John Callender lamented:

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 135-7.

<sup>245</sup> Roger Williams, *George Fox Digg'd out of his Burrowes, Or an Offer of DISPUTATION On fourteen Proposalls made this last Summer 1672 (so call'd) unto G. Fox then present on Rode-Island in New-England* (Boston: John Foster, 1676), p. 220.

<sup>246</sup> Gura, pp. 78-79.

But so it is, where Men differ about Religion, their contentions are usually the most sharp, and carried on with the most irreligious Heat and Animosity: Even tho' they differ about the smallest Matters, or when, as was the Case here, they differ from each other but in a very little.<sup>247</sup>

Callender's treatment of Roger Williams also bears this rearrangement of priorities. His description of the civility controversy is extremely brief. He gives a very curt list of the theological disagreements without expounding on them, adding "and it is said some wordly Things, helped to encrease the Animositities," anticipating a historiographical trend of supplanting genuine religious difference with a "secular" explanation that later gained prominence.<sup>248</sup> In analyzing historiography of Roger Williams going back to the eighteenth century, LeRoy Moore, Jr. argues that Callender's work represents the first example of what he labels the "realistic approach" to Williams: that is, Callender does not portray Williams as a proto-humanist, pointing out that his belief in freedom of conscience was grounded in believing that only under those conditions could true Christians find the truth, rather than inherently valuable in and of itself.<sup>249</sup>

Callender made similar observations about Samuel Gorton. In discussing the Shawomet purchase, Callender begins, "Here it may be proper, to take some Notice of the religious Opinions of Mr. Gorton, whose Followers were called Gortonists, or

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<sup>247</sup> Callender, p. 26.

<sup>248</sup> Callender, p. 17.

<sup>249</sup> LeRoy Moore, Jr. "Roger Williams and the Historians," *Church History* 32, No. 4 (Dec. 1963): 444. While Moore groups Callender's portrayal with later "realistic" portrayals that pushed back against the heroic image of Williams in favor of a more even-handed and pragmatic treatment, the heroic construction of Williams in historiography was not yet complete at that time. This makes Moore's placement of Callender's work in his "realistic" category somewhat chronologically problematic. However, Moore's "realistic" assessment of Callender's work sets the stage for Waldrop's portrayal of Callender, himself, as the realist.

Gortonians, holding some Things peculiar to themselves, and different from all the other People in New-England.” But then he never does that! He gives Gorton’s theology even less time than Williams’ or the antinomians’, which is to say, none at all. He describes Gorton’s land controversy, and after concluding that summary, writes, “What Mr. Gorton’s religious Opinions really were, is now as hard to tell,” and that his opponents ascribed beliefs to him that he did not actually hold, without in any way explaining Gorton’s theology.<sup>250</sup>

This pivot away from emphasis on theology represents broader changes in religiosity in eighteenth-century America. In contextualizing the experiences of Newport revival leader Sarah Osborn, Catherine Brekus described eighteenth-century evangelicalism as “emphasizing heart-centered experience over dry, systematic theologies.”<sup>251</sup> Greater emphasis on the individual’s conversion and first-hand spiritual experience shrank the importance of the kind of rigorous theological discourse that Roger Williams favored in debating Quakers. In explaining the religious transformations of the Great Awakening in New England, Douglas Winiarski cautions against seeing a stereotypical image of seventeenth-century New England puritanism as “plagued by the moribund formalism often denigrated by scholars of early evangelicalism.” He points out that “acrimonious theological debate and sectarian schism had roiled the New England colonies a century earlier” in order to argue that the Great Awakening revived latent New England radicalism, and posits these debates as in opposition to the image of “moribund formalism”; the debates proved that the theology was not so moribund after all.<sup>252</sup> But in

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<sup>250</sup> Callender, pp. 35-38.

<sup>251</sup> Brekus, p. 11.

<sup>252</sup> Winiarski, pp. 8-9.

*Gorton's Ghost* and *Historical Discourse*, the authors treat these two realities as related, not opposing. The schisms were, from their perspective, caused by an overemphasis on theology rather than evidence to the contrary.

What Brekus, Winiarski, and most historians of the Great Awakening would agree upon is that New Lights of the Great Awakening harnessed the power of more ordinary, more marginal members of early American society in opposition to more traditional sources of religious authority, which resulted in more spirituality of experience at the expense of spirituality based in exegesis. Callender, a very well-connected Baptist minister with ties to Newport and Boston elites, surely does not fit the criteria of “ordinary,” and yet espoused the attitude that the tired theological debates of the seventeenth century should remain in the seventeenth century. As for the socioeconomic status of the anonymous author of *Gorton's Ghost*, we cannot say for certain, beyond that the author was reasonably literate, which, for early eighteenth-century New England, is not saying much. That the author knew about Gorton does not necessarily indicate being better studied in Rhode Island history than most; as Callender pointed out, Gortonists maintained their own weekly worship services for “above sixty Years,” or roughly to at least about the turn of the eighteenth century.<sup>253</sup> Both Alexander Hamilton and Ezra Stiles met a man understood to be the last living Gortonist.<sup>254</sup> An “ordinary” Rhode Islander might even be in a better position to know about Gorton than Callender, who was more Bostonian than Rhode Islander. Regardless, by retelling a tale of a founder visiting them in a dream, this anonymous author espoused the emphasis on experiential knowledge, at

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<sup>253</sup> Callender, p. 38.

<sup>254</sup> Stiles' and Hamilton's encounters with John Angell are cited in Robert A. Geake, “John Angell: The Last Gortonist,” *Small State, Big History: The Online Review of Rhode Island History*, 21 May 2014, accessed 14 January 2023, <https://smallstatebighistory.com/john-angell-the-last-gortonist/>.



the expense of theology, that most historians agree was integral to the spirituality of the Great Awakening.

### **The “Presbyterian Sect”**

Some further Talk I did expect  
 About this *Presbyterian* Sect,  
 But found an End unto the Theme;  
 For when I ‘woke ‘twas but a dream.

The above final stanza of the poem implies that the reason that neither the ghost nor the speaker will explicitly reveal the sect is because the eighteenth-century reader probably did not need the answer spelled out. This leads the twenty-first century historian, for whom the sects’ identity may be less immediately clear, to ask: which denomination, or denominations, in early eighteenth-century Rhode Island were candidates for this poet’s ire? We might be tempted to assume he literally means Presbyterians as a discrete denomination, but given that “presbyterian” was used in a derogatory way during this period to refer to any Protestants seen as exerting excessive control over congregations, we cannot immediately conclude that. While the following exercise to speculate on whom this broadside specifically targeted may be fraught and ultimately inconclusive, it allows us to see some of the issues that went into the use of “presbyterian” as an epithet.

We can potentially narrow down the denomination to either Anglicans or Congregationalists by breaking down the clues from the poem into three categories: that the sect is relatively new to the colony, that it is “presbyterian” in nature, and that it seeks to make a profit from the Gospel. After excluding the nascent Jewish community outright

as a possibility due to the explicitly Christian nature of specifically selling the Gospel, we can evaluate the merits of Quakers, Baptists, Anglicans, or Congregationalists as candidates. Beginning with the newness of the sect, the ghost came to warn the speaker of “those who much do seek/For to come in and spoil your Peace;” praying that “they don’t increase.” Those who seek to spoil the peace, but presumably have not yet had the chance to do so irreparably, and have not yet increased to an insurmountable threat, strongly suggests that he speaks of a sect that has not yet caused too much controversy in Rhode Island, but is about to. One might wonder, given Samuel Gorton’s outspoken criticism of Quakers and his presence and participation in the 1672 debates on Williams’ side, if that is the sect in question. While Gorton did see Quakers in this light during his lifetime, the ship had long since sailed of Quakers increasing and disturbing the peace, and the early eighteenth-century context does not bear such a warning as relevant. Baptists fit this description of a relatively new and growing sect least of all, as the oldest and most established denomination in the colony. That only leaves Congregationalists and Anglicans as relative newcomers on the rise.

The second category of “presbyterian” also favors Congregationalists and Anglicans, perhaps Congregationalists slightly more. In presbyterian church government, lay elders and ministers preside over multiple congregations as part of an assembly of peers. Compared to Baptists, Congregational ecclesiastical structure more resembled something that could be labeled “presbyterian.” When Roger Williams accused Massachusetts puritans of being presbyterian in the 1630s, he did so due to their proposal to have individual pastors meet to discuss issues, which amounted to presbyterianism in spirit if not in fact. Perhaps to many early seventeenth-century puritans the charge

seemed ridiculous when one compared the New England way to Anglicanism, but in the early eighteenth century, Congregational church government was certainly comparatively more presbyterian than that of Baptists. During this period, Baptists often used “Congregational” and “presbyterian” interchangeably even though Congregationalists did not see themselves as such.<sup>255</sup> Surely Anglicans were more presbyterian than Congregationalists, but the frequency with which Baptists signaled that they saw “Congregational” and “presbyterian” as synonymous moves the needle slightly more towards Congregationalists.

Inconsistent use of the term “presbyterian” somewhat complicates this conclusion, but still points to Congregationalists. Callender’s inconsistent use of the distinction between “Congregational” and “Presbyterian” demonstrates its malleability in the early eighteenth century. Seventeenth-century puritans, “not perfectly agreed among themselves,” split into “Fathers of those since called *Presbyterians*,” who “generally strove to keep their Places in the Church, without *conforming* to some of the most offensive Ceremonies,” and “Fathers of those since called *Independents* and *Congregationalists*,” who sought “to lay aside the Liturgy, and all the Ceremonies together.”<sup>256</sup> But in the earlier cited statistics that he presented, he lumped Rhode Island’s “*three Presbyterian or Congregational Churches*” together.<sup>257</sup> Still, whether distinguished as two separate branches of puritanism or used synonymously with “Congregational,” the term applied to descendants of puritans rather than Anglicans.

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<sup>255</sup> In 1700, Increase Mather called the differences between Presbyterians and Congregationalists “inconsiderable” and proposed the potential for their combining in *The Order of the Gospel Professed...* (Boston: B. Green & J. Allen for Nicholas Buttolph, 1700), p. 139. However, an anonymous response by New England ministers the same year criticized this position: *Gospel Order Revived...* (New York: William Bradford, 1700).

<sup>256</sup> Callender, p. 7.

<sup>257</sup> Callender, p. 68.

That said, the issue of profit prompts consideration of Anglicans as the denomination most conspicuously engaged in profiteering, even if insulting Anglicans by calling them “Presbyterians” was far rarer. Gorton’s ghost compares the sect to Judas, who sold out betrayed Jesus “For Silver Pieces Three Times Ten:/So do these blind and silly men.” Although they “Think what they do is very well,/When they the holy Gospel sell,” he condemned them for making salvation “their worldly Gain.” Anglicans most readily fit this description due to their connection to the SPG. Anglicanism first arrived in the region during the Dominion of New England and steadily gained influence over the course of the eighteenth century. In Massachusetts, Boston residents petitioned the King for support in forming an Anglican church in the city as early as 1679, with the first church established in 1686; Connecticut followed in short order. In September 1699, sixteen Newport residents petitioned Lord Bellomont for assistance in maintaining an Anglican minister.<sup>258</sup> After a royal charter established the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts in 1701, “the Church-Wardens of *Rhode-Island*, wrote to the Bishop of *London*, and to the Society, in the Year 1702, declaring their early Zeal... to worship GOD after the manner of the Church of *England*.”<sup>259</sup> In evidenced in chapter one of this dissertation, we see this influence readily in Rhode Island law, which came to explicitly favor the Church of England in some circumstances.

However, in Rhode Island, the efforts to establish the first three Anglican churches in the colony—in Newport, Providence, and Kingston—were spearheaded by

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<sup>258</sup> Mary Ellen Loughrey, *France and Rhode Island, 1686-1800* (New York: King’s Crown Press, 1944) p. 8.

<sup>259</sup> David Humphreys, *An Historical Account of the Incorporated Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts...* (London: Joseph Downing, 1730), pp. 312-318. See also, Edgar Legare Pennington, “Anglican Beginnings in Massachusetts,” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 10, No. 3 (Sept. 1941): 242-289.

Huguenots, particularly Gabriel Bernon, who “might even have been called a founder of Episcopalianism in the colony.”<sup>260</sup> Bernon “had been a member of the French Reformed Church in Boston, but in Rhode Island there were too few Frenchmen to support a church of that denomination.”<sup>261</sup> Although Huguenots were Calvinists, the Church of England had welcomed them in England itself and the resources at the disposal of the Church were surely attractive.<sup>262</sup> Scholars also point to how most Huguenots fleeing France sought cultural assimilation in becoming Anglicans.<sup>263</sup> The economic motivations support Olson’s findings that specific economic circumstances in both eighteenth-century Massachusetts and Rhode Island could, sometimes, foster greater denominational diversity in the former than the latter.

Yet Bernon’s theological and ecclesiastical justifications for allying with Anglicans also highlight important forces at work in colonial Rhode Island. Bernon saw Anglicanism as having a higher “degree of lay control” than Congregationalism or Catholicism due to its control by the state, which limited the ability of clergy to abuse power locally. “Only in a form of religion controlled by the state did he see any hope of controlling the claims of the clergy.”<sup>264</sup> To become an Anglican in Rhode Island seems

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<sup>260</sup> Robert M. Kingdon, “Why Did the Huguenot Refugees in the American Colonies Become Episcopalian?” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 49, no. 4 (Dec. 1980): 324.

<sup>261</sup> Loughrey, p. 8. There had been a short-lived Huguenot congregation in the “Frenchtown” settlement, which collapsed due to conflicting claims over land sold to the Huguenots by the Atherton Company. Rhode Island colonists harassed and intimidated Huguenot settlers, often violently, causing them to scatter; the majority settled in Massachusetts rather than Rhode Island. This violent intimidation seems to be primarily motivated by the issue of conflicting land claims, though it is not impossible that xenophobia and religious animosity fueled it as well (Loughrey, p. 6).

<sup>262</sup> Kingdon, p. 329-333.

<sup>263</sup> Jon Butler claims that the cultural assimilation was “rapid” in *The Huguenots in America: A Refugee People in a New World Society* (Harvard, 1992). Catharine Randall counters Butler’s assertion by claiming that Huguenots “underwent a lengthy period of adaptation without assimilation” (Randall, *From a Far Country: Camisards and Huguenots in the Atlantic World* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010), p. 1).

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 334.

counter to that opinion, but points to the slippage apparent in eighteenth-century Rhode Island of implying that the mother country's established church took precedence.

Prominent New Englanders, not least Massachusetts elites like Cotton Mather, considered it a triumph that Huguenots sought refuge in the region. "New Englanders [cared] about Huguenots because they were co-militants in a saintly battle against Antichrist in which a primary weapon was patient suffering."<sup>265</sup> This aided New England in fulfilling its role in the global Protestant struggle. "The Huguenots' status as godly martyrs bought them important credibility in Protestant circles from Berlin to London and beyond, as officials lined up to offer support to these 'poor French Protestants' who had sacrificed everything for their faith."<sup>266</sup> Therefore, the establishment of Anglicanism in Rhode Island was part of a broader struggle of winning the Atlantic world for Protestants, a triumph of taking a bite out of Catholic France, on top of being part of a greater transatlantic missionary endeavor. Massachusetts and Rhode Island both had Anglicanism and they both had Huguenots, but Rhode Island had the latter to thank for the former. In this way, the parallel rise of Anglicanism in Rhode Island had a tighter relationship to bolstering global Protestant hegemony than that of Massachusetts. Furthermore, Anglicanism came to Rhode Island as an economic and social compromise.

An exchange that took place thirty-five years after the publication of *Gorton's Ghost*, and twenty-four years after Callender's *Historical Discourse*, shows how Massachusetts and Rhode Island came to see the SPG later in the eighteenth century. In 1763, Jonathan Mayhew published his *Observations on the Charter and Conduct of the*

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<sup>265</sup> Adrian Chastain Weimer, "Huguenot Refugees and the Meaning of Charity in Early New England," *Church History* 86, no. 2 (June 2017): 369.

<sup>266</sup> Owen Stanwood, *The Global Refuge: Huguenots in an Age of Empire* (Oxford, 2020), pp. 3-4.

*Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts*. Mayhew called the Church of England “aliene” from the “Simplicity of the Gospel” and its hierarchy antithetical to the character of New England. “When we consider the narrow, censorious and bitter spirit that prevails in too many of the episcopalians among us; and what might probably be the sad consequence,” that the “growing party should once get the upper hand” and “the church of England might become the established religion here,” then, naturally, New Englanders would be wary of the SPG’s influence. “Is it not enough, that they persecuted us out of the old world? Will they pursue us into the new to convert us here?”<sup>267</sup>

However, Mayhew couched his criticisms carefully. The SPG did not infringe upon religious liberty by doing as they pleased, and he had no intention of infringing upon any British subject’s “private capacity... to encourage and propagate episcopacy in America,” that “private capacity” extending to formal organizations such as the SPG. At the same time, it was “a matter of public concernment” that the charity’s conduct sometimes departed from its charter and could be considered guilty of “misapplication of their fund.”<sup>268</sup>

An anonymous “Gentleman of *Rhode-Island* Colony” responded the same year, calling Mayhew a “blind Bigot” who supported “setting up an Inquisition against the Religion of the Nation, within his Majesty’s own Dominions.” As covered in the introduction, the Church of England did not then, and has not ever, become the established church outside of England by default without explicit establishment by the colony, realm, or commonwealth. And yet, this Rhode Island gentleman demonstrates

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<sup>267</sup> Jonathan Mayhew, *Observations on the Charter and Conduct of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts...* (Boston: Richard and Samuel Draper, 1763), pp. 155-56.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-13.

that he saw the Church of England as something of a default established church of the colonies. Mayhew, the Rhode Island gentleman contends, “gives a broad Hint that the Congregational Plan is by Law established” in New England, but the Rhode Islander argues that that cannot legally be the case in any English colony, as none could usurp the Church of England. As such, the very framing of the SPG and the Church of England as tolerated in New England so long as it behaved was flawed. What was once a new sect that drew suspicion was now considered by some to be the established church de jure. The anonymous author of *Gorton's Ghost* likely would have favored Mayhew's misgivings and been startled by the “gentleman from Rhode Island's” response.

While the labeling of the sect as “presbyterian” is compelling for concluding that the poet referred to Congregationalists, the poet's intense focus on profit and wealth in the broadside weigh the scale just a little heavier on the side of Anglicans. At the same time, even though the poem seems to imply the “sect” is a discrete denomination, it is possible that, in this era of blurry denominational lines, when secular organization and association trumped hard theology in a way it had not in the previous century, the poet meant to criticize a “sect” in a metaphorical sense: any and all Christians who sought wealth and prestige in the bewildering religious environment of early eighteenth-century New England. Regardless of who exactly the poet intended to criticize, the poet captures the anxieties of a region transformed by trade, transatlantic missionary activity, and alignments of otherwise religious interests along socioeconomic lines.

## **Conclusion**

*Mr. Samuel Gorton's Ghost* represents several related transformations in Rhode Island. Rhode Island now had its own press to air its religious grievances and did not



need to outsource to London or Boston. Yet in other ways, London and Boston were closer than ever before, as Callender's experiences—and the fact that he printed his *Historical Discourse* in Boston instead of Newport—demonstrate, as does the fretting about increased wealth central to the poem. That *Gorton's Ghost* spent no time at all enumerating Gorton's theology, decried persecution for its own sake, and conveyed authority in the experience of being visited in a dream, shows the transformations in early American religion that would come to a head in the Great Awakening, favoring direct experience and losing some of the sage granularity of the seventeenth-century theologians. In the 1640s, Roger Williams saw Samuel Gorton as a potential threat to Protestant hegemony in his unorthodox beliefs and bellicose behavior. In the 1670s, Gorton supported Williams in challenging a new denomination that threatened Rhode Island's place in transatlantic Protestant hegemony. And in the 1720s and 30s, Gorton represented a sincere, if unorthodox, Christian uncorrupted by a desire for wealth and power. Compared to the behemoth social and economic power of the SPG, a Gortonist seemed remarkably quaint. If the "gentleman from Rhode Island" defending the SPG in the 1760s is any indication, fears of the author of *Gorton's Ghost* would indeed come to be realized.

## Chapter V Community, Caution, and Cynicism in Rhode Island during the American Revolution

President Washington arrived in Newport around ten o'clock in the morning on Tuesday, August 17, 1790. A warm welcome for this visit was far from a foregone conclusion. During a tour of New England the previous year, the president skipped Rhode Island, which had yet to ratify the constitution.<sup>269</sup> With the ratification debate behind them, the reception from the inhabitants of Newport during his 1790 visit was celebratory. "Upon the packet heaving in sight, the standard of the State was hoisted at Fort Washington, the Bells rang, and the Shipping displayed their Colours." Cannons were fired. "A large and respectable Committee from the Town, and the Rev. Clergy, received the President," and "escorted him to his Lodgings." The Newport elite hosted a private dinner with the President that evening.<sup>270</sup>

The next morning, inhabitants of Newport delivered four addresses to Washington. An "address from the town" tactfully appealed to Washington for relief from the economic devastation the port sustained during the war, concluding with the blessing, "May kind Providence long continue your invaluable Life."<sup>271</sup> The Society of Free Masons in Newport also addressed the president, wishing that "the Sovereign Architect of

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<sup>269</sup> During that New England tour, October 15 to November 13, 1789, only North Carolina and Rhode Island remained as states yet to ratify. While other states had close votes, Rhode Island's vote was the closest of all states when it finally ratified in May of 1790, less than two months before Washington's visit: thirty-four in favor, and thirty-two against. Pauline Maier attributes Rhode Island's reluctance to ratify the constitution to its state-issued paper money to resolve issues with debt incurred during the war in *Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787-1788* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), p. 223-225. More on Washington's 1790 visit can be found in T.H. Breen, *George Washington's Journey: The President Forges a New Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), pp. 200-206.

<sup>270</sup> *Newport Herald*, August 19, 1790, p. 3. The *Newport Mercury* published a nearly identical account on August 23, 1790, p. 1. The fort, formerly Fort Anne, Fort George, and Fort Liberty, in that order, was renamed Fort Washington in 1784.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*

the Universe, may always en-compass you with his holy Protection.”<sup>272</sup> Though the address from the Free Masons contained more distinctly deist language than the address from the town, both addresses contained little overt mention of religion other than in service to communicating wishes for Washington’s well-being.<sup>273</sup> The “address from the clergy”—signed by five Baptist and two Congregational pastors—rejoiced that “Divine Providence [had] crown’d [his] temples with unfading laurels” and that he was “highly favored by GOD.” Supporting him, they declared, was their spiritual duty. The clergy wished that “all the families of these wide extended realms, may enjoy, under an equal and judicious administration of government, peace and prosperity, with all the blessings attendant on civil and religious liberty.”<sup>274</sup>

The “Hebrew Congregation of Newport,” Congregation Yeshuat Israel, also addressed the president. Initially, no Rhode Island newspapers included this address alongside the printed addresses from the town, select Protestant clergy, and freemasons of Newport, but it appeared in a Providence paper by September.<sup>275</sup> The warden of the Yeshuat Israel, Moses Seixas, penned it. The congregation did not have a permanent rabbi and relied on itinerant rabbis for most of the seventeenth and eighteenth century—although by this time they did have a handsome synagogue, Touro Synagogue, completed in 1763.<sup>276</sup> Even if they had a visiting rabbi at that time, a permanent resident with a

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<sup>272</sup> *The Newport Mercury*, August 23, 1790, p. 2.

<sup>273</sup> For more on Freemasonry during the American Revolution and its relationship to Christianity and deism, see chapter 2, “Revolutionary Freemasonry: Republican and Christian, 1757-1825” in David G. Hackett, *That Religion in Which All Men Agree: Freemasonry in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

<sup>274</sup> *The Newport Herald*, August 19, 1790, p. 3; *The Newport Mercury*, August 23, 1790, p. 1.

<sup>275</sup> The first newspaper printing of the address from the “Hebrew Congregation of Newport” to Washington appears to have been in the *Providence Gazette*, September 18, 1790.

<sup>276</sup> For more on itinerant rabbis in eighteenth-century Rhode Island, see Laura Liebman, “From Holy Land to New England Canaan: Rabbi Haim Carigal and Sephardic Itinerant Preaching in the Eighteenth Century,” *Early American Literature*, 44:9 (2009), pp. 71-93.

leadership position was the more appropriate messenger, though Seixas had remained a loyalist through most of the conflict.<sup>277</sup> Whether his address expressed a sincere change of heart, humored Washington for the sake of his community, or some combination of both, is uncertain. Seixas, who also served as the Masonic Master of Newport's lodge, had "the unique privilege of signing [and delivering] two of the four addresses delivered to the president."<sup>278</sup> The address from Yeshuat Israel begins deferentially. "Sir, Permit the children of the stock of Abraham to approach you, with the most cordial affection and esteem for your person and merits—and to join with our fellow-citizens in welcoming you to Newport." He compared God's protection of Washington, and Washington's courage, to that of David and Daniel. "Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free citizens," Seixas continued, "we now (with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty Disposer of all events) behold a government erected by the Majesty of the People."<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> Multiple conflicting interpretations exist as to whether or not Jewish Americans were predominantly Patriot or Loyalist. Samuel Reznick claimed that "most Jews were aligned with the patriotic side, since they were predominantly non-English in origin and had no particular attachment to Great Britain" in *Unrecognized Patriots: The Jews in the American Revolution* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), p. 135. Reznick also distinguished between "passive Loyalism" and "active Loyalism" based on whether or not an individual or congregation was under British occupation and therefore had limited meaningful agency, though the same logic could be applied to all Americans. In *God Against the Revolution: The Loyalist Clergy's Case Against the American Revolution* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2018), Gregg L. Frazer argues that minority religious groups, by and large, did not trust the Patriot majority to protect them, but also argues that Jews and Catholics were the exception in that most were Patriots (p. 6-7). However, Frazer neglects regional differences in Jewish allegiance. In "'How it Will End, the Blessed God Knows': A Reading of Jewish Correspondence during the Revolutionary War Era," *American Jewish History* 99, No. 4 (October 2015): 284, Michael Hoberman contends that Jewish communities in the South tended to be Patriot, Jews in New York were split until Patriot Jewish New Yorkers fled to Philadelphia, Connecticut, and "other places" during the occupation of New York in 1776 and left a mostly Loyalist Jewish community behind, while Newport was consistently Loyalist-leaning with a few notable exceptions, such as Aaron Lopez. However, as the Savannah, Georgia congregation remained mostly Loyalist during the conflict, it is not clear which specific communities in the South Hoberman meant.

<sup>278</sup> Fritz Hirschfeld, *George Washington and the Jews* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), p. 31. Called King David's Lodge, Newport's Masonic Lodge had mostly Jewish leadership from its inception.

<sup>279</sup> *The Providence Gazette*, September 18, 1790, p. 1.

Washington delivered responses to all four addresses that same day before departing the city for Providence. By far the most well-known is his response to Seixas' address. Washington assured them, "For happily the government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction—to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who lives under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens."

Washington's words are immortalized as his benevolent opinion of religious freedom and for his genius in his crafting of the sonorous phrase "to bigotry no sanction—to persecution no assistance."<sup>280</sup> But there is one problem with the immortalization of Washington's words: they are not Washington's words. To elaborate on a previously quoted passage from the address that Seixas penned, "Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free citizens, we now (with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty Disposer of all events) behold a government erected by the MAJESTY OF THE PEOPLE—a government which to bigotry gives no sanction—to persecution no assistance; but generously affording to ALL liberty of conscience, and immunities of citizenship."<sup>281</sup> Washington was not plagiarizing when he parroted Seixas' words back to him in his response, but instead intended to acknowledge Seixas' words and communicate that Seixas, and the congregation, had been heard.<sup>282</sup> Neither was this tactic unique; Washington often made a point to phrase his responses to community addresses in such a way that utilized elements of the language that their address used. Despite

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

<sup>282</sup> Much of what constitutes plagiarism in the twenty-first century was not considered as such in the early modern period. For more on early modern concepts of plagiarism, see Giovanna Ceserani, "Narrative, Interpretation, and Plagiarism in Mr. Robertson's 1778 History of Ancient Greece," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 66, No. 3 (July 2005): 422-432. Jack N. Rackove also puts forth this interpretation of Washington's address in *Beyond Belief, Beyond Conscience: The Radical Significance of the Free Exercise of Religion* (Oxford, 2020), p. 108.

Washington's intention to flatter, not steal from, Seixas' address, public memory has tacitly granted a Jewish American's words to a very prominent Protestant.

But more than simply representing an example of the slippage of provenance and intention that dogs Rhode Island history and memory, the exchanges between these Newport communities and President Washington during his 1790 visit highlight prominent features of the religiopolitical landscape of late eighteenth-century Rhode Island. That freemasons addressed the president in deistic language seems as unremarkable in Rhode Island as it would in nearly every corner of the new United States, offering further evidence that many facets of Rhode Island's religious liberality were quite unexceptional in the eighteenth century. That the address from the town contained religious language points to the ways that Protestantism remained embedded in government after disestablishment—this was already part of Rhode Island's past, and now part of the entire new nation's present and future. That the "address from the clergy" included five Baptist and two Congregational pastors demonstrates the forging of a Protestant mainline in which urban, educated Baptists more often collaborated with their peers in cities than with rural fellow Baptists, the continental network of the former only strengthened by the Revolution. That Anglican clergy did not contribute demonstrated the abject state of disarray the denomination found itself in following independence from the empire that birthed it.<sup>283</sup> That Quaker clergy were not included shows that Protestant

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<sup>283</sup> In the spring and summer of 1789, members of Trinity Church in Newport were dealing with the fallout of Rev. James Sayre leaving amidst controversy and had not yet secured a new minister. What was more, members had not yet decided upon whether or not to follow the guidelines for the Episcopal Church outlined by the General Convention in Philadelphia that summer. George Champlin Mason, *Annals of Trinity Church, Newport, R.I.* (Philadelphia: The Evans Printing House, 1890), pp. 188-191. Trinity was also still in bad shape physically, which certainly did not help. When British troops left after the occupation of Newport, patriots "ransacked" Trinity Church. This was, in part, "retaliation" because the occupying British maintained Trinity in good condition "although they turned other churches into stables." Charles Mampong, "The New England Anglican Clergy in the American Revolution," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 9, No. 4 (Dec. 1940): 283-284. For more on

hegemony consolidated around denominations most invested in nascent nationalism. Although some Quakers had addressed Washington the previous year, they did so on their own terms rather than in lockstep with a particular city and state.<sup>284</sup> And Protestant hegemony could not be more obvious than in the optics of a Jewish congregation having to give their own address separate from the rest of the city's clergy. True that the congregation would not have understood Seixas as a warden to be "clergy"; furthermore, Newport's Jewish community likely wanted to express their own sentiments and interests. However, that their sentiments and interests necessarily differed from the shared interests of Baptists and Congregationalists, and the fact that newspaper printers chose to exclude Seixas address—and Washington's response—in the initial printings of the exchanges, demonstrates the growing consolidated power of ecumenical Protestantism.

Four categories of reaction to the American Revolution prevailed in Rhode Island. The first was caution. Jewish Rhode Islanders, in particular, understood that their position was uncertain in the high-stakes changing of the guard of prevailing Protestant powers. In comparison to some other Jewish communities in the new United States, Newport's Jewish community had a great deal to lose and not quite enough assurance that they would not lose it, reflected in their correspondence with other Jewish congregations up and down the East Coast in coordinating a possible address to Washington. Second, some Rhode Islanders attempted to strengthen continental, and later national, networks of

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the effects of the Revolution on Anglican churches, see chapter 5, "The War's Consequences for Protestant Communities" in Katherine Carté, *Religion and the American Revolution: An Imperial History* (Chapel Hill: UNC for the Omohundro Institute, 2021), pp. 207-245.

<sup>284</sup> *To the President of the United States. The Address of the Religious Society Called Quakers, from their Yearly Meeting for Pennsylvania, New-Jersey, Delaware, and the Western Parts of Virginia and Maryland* (Philadelphia: Daniel Humphreys, 1789). My research did not turn up an answer to why Rhode Island Quakers were not involved in this address. See also, Paul F. Boller, Jr., "GEORGE WASHINGTON AND THE QUAKERS," *Bulletin of Friends Historical Association* 49, No. 2 (Autumn 1960): 67-83.

bureaucracy and financial support. The coverage of the Jewish correspondence bears this point, as does the activity of Baptist Rhode Islanders. Third, some Rhode Islanders, loyalists and Anglicans in particular, responded with cynicism to greater calls for political and religious liberty. Casting patriots as insincere hypocrites, and therefore sidestepping direct discussion of the political and social issues at the heart of the Revolution, was not an uncommon tactic throughout North America and the wider Atlantic world. However, this cynical position held particular relevance to Rhode Islanders as they consumed romanticized versions of their own early history of religious liberty and the development of religious liberty globally, which I will cover before delving into two prominent source bases of Rhode Island loyalist cynicism. Whereas in the previous chapter, *Mr. Samuel Gorton's Ghost* demonstrated that Rhode Islanders were willing to forego attention to seventeenth-century theological disputes to laud an early founder without reservation, the opposite takes places for Oliver Cromwell, universally revered in seventeenth-century New England but used by both loyalists and patriots as an example of someone who promised lofty ideals of liberty but turned out to be little more than an opportunistic, bloodthirsty hypocrite. And finally, not unlike the near unanimous denigration of Cromwell in Revolutionary New England, anti-Catholicism in early Rhode Island was simultaneously so solid and so flexible that both loyalist and patriot Rhode Islanders wielded it against each other in their arguments.

### **The Precarity of the Jewish Community in Early National Rhode Island**



In late June of 1790, Yeshuat Israel received a request from the trustees of the Congregation Sherith Israel in New York.<sup>285</sup> The letter began with an indication that the trustees sent the same letter to all “our Bretheren of the different Congregations in the United States.” They were “desirous of addressing the President of the United States, in one general address, comprehending all the Congregations professing our Holy Religion in America,” rather than each congregation addressing him individually. The trustees concluded that this “will be less irksome to the president, than troubling him to reply to every individual address.” The New York trustees conclude their letter to Newport by distancing themselves from the Jewish congregation in Savannah, Georgia, staunch loyalists during the war, who went rogue and drafted their own address to the president without consulting any other congregations.<sup>286</sup> The trustees saw this as not only ineffective without a “general plan,” but an inappropriate overstepping of their authority and a slight to all other American Jewish congregations.<sup>287</sup>

Each congregation’s approach to the task of addressing Washington depended on how much, or how little, their community had to lose vis-à-vis the Protestant environment in which they lived. As Michael Hoberman argues, although the Revolution

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<sup>285</sup> The exchanges covered in this section are similarly narrated by Andrew Porwancher in *The Jewish World of Alexander Hamilton* (Princeton, 2021), p. 136-139. I first drafted my narration of this exchange before the publication of Porwancher’s book in August 2021; my advisor received this draft in June 2021. When I read Porwancher’s book, I found several instances of similarity in our narrations. I have endeavored to edit this section in service to avoiding the appearance of plagiarism to the best of my ability. Any similarities that remain are unintentional and reflect my own original writing.

<sup>286</sup> See footnote 275 for historiography of loyalism and Patriotism among Jewish Americans. While some historians contend that Jews tended to be loyalist in order to preserve rights established in the colonial period that they did not trust the new United States to continue to honor, the loyalism of Jewish Savannah residents cannot be explained this way, based on their relationship with the colony of Georgia elaborated upon in the next paragraph.

<sup>287</sup> Letter of Trustees of K.K.S.I. to Newport congregation regarding joint letter to Pres. Washington, June 20, 1790, American Jewish Historical Society via Jewish Life in America database. The congregations of Philadelphia, New York, Charleston, and Richmond apparently contacted Washington separately, later, given that Washington addressed them as a group in December of 1790. See “From George Washington to the Hebrew Congregations of Philadelphia, New York, Charleston, and Richmond, 13 December 1790,” Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-07-02-0036>.

gave American Jews an opportunity to have a greater sense of ownership over their engagement with political affairs, and an opportunity to engage as insiders rather than outsiders, many also remained extremely cautious of their image and reputation.<sup>288</sup> In this case, the degree of caution of each congregation varied depending on their circumstances. The Savannah congregation may have had less to lose in going rogue than the others. While the community had freedom of worship, their relationship with the colonial legislature of Georgia was a cool one, including repeatedly ignored or denied requests for a burial ground without explanation, leading them to give up on the effort and maintain a cemetery on privately-owned land.<sup>289</sup> Savannah Jews knew what patience and caution had (not) accomplished in the past, and were already accustomed to taking matters into their own hands regardless of the government they lived under—which, in 1790, still included an established church.

However, New York, Charleston, and Newport had more at stake. The Jewish community of New York, which began as the Jewish community of New Amsterdam, had already been through the ordeal of securing rights with one empire and maintaining them through a transition to another. While the 1730s and 40s saw some legal challenges to Jewish New Yorkers' rights to freeman status and citizenship, New York disestablished the Anglican church in 1777.<sup>290</sup> Many Jewish New Yorkers in the Revolutionary era occupied the same spaces as prominent Protestants, including, as in Newport, Masonic

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<sup>288</sup> Michael Hoberman, "'How it Will End, the Blessed God Knows': A Reading of Jewish Correspondence During the Revolutionary War Era," *American Jewish History* 99, No. 4 (October 2015): 281-313.

<sup>289</sup> David T. Morgan, "Judaism in Eighteenth-Century Georgia," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 58, No. 1 (Spring 1974): 46.

<sup>290</sup> See Max J. Kohler, "Civil Status of the Jews in Colonial New York," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, No. 6 (1897): 81-106.

lodges.<sup>291</sup> Charleston Jews also enjoyed “acceptance and engagement” in their city, having “forged ties with prominent citizens,” a situation further improved by disestablishment of the church in 1790.<sup>292</sup> The Jewish community in Charleston even had rights Newport Jews did not; while Rhode Island denied naturalized citizenship to Jewish residents explicitly on the basis of religion, many Charleston Jews were able to secure citizenship in the colonial era.<sup>293</sup> Clearly, comparing Charleston and Newport demonstrates that an established Protestant denomination as the official church was not the ultimate determinate of which specific rights Jewish Americans enjoyed in any given colony or state, but in general, the more respect and the more rights a given community garnered in the colonial era, the more likely they were to approach acting as a community among powerful Protestants with caution. This implies that congregations like Newport, New York, and Charleston saw their respected position in their communities as insecure, contingent upon their perceived due deference to Protestant hegemony.

When Moses Seixas responded to Sherith Israel, his response demonstrated that the Newport Jewish community’s rapport with its Protestant neighbors and with the state government in 1790 was fragile. The congregation was “of opinion, that as we are so small in number, it would be treating the Legislature & Other Large Bodies in this State, with a great degree of indelicacy, for us to address the President of the United States,

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<sup>291</sup> See “Part I: 1654-1865” of Deborah Dash Moore et al., *Jewish New York: The Remarkable Story of a City and a People* (NYU, 2017).

<sup>292</sup> Daniel Kurt Ackermann, “The 1794 Synagogue of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim of Charleston: Reconstructed and Reconsidered,” *American Jewish History* 93, No. 2 (June 2007): 168.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167. Interestingly, as Ackermann highlights, Jewish residents of Charleston were able to successfully argue that they legally counted as “Protestants,” and South Carolina extended citizenship to all Protestants. Rhode Island Jews were denied citizenship based on the language of the 1663 charter that excluded all non-Christians from property ownership (and therefore freemen status *ipso facto*) and citizenship. The prohibition against property ownership was reversed in the 1710s, though Jews were barred from holding office in the 1730s. See chapter two of this dissertation.

previous to any of them.” Their numbers were indeed small. Many loyalist members of Newport’s Jewish community left during and immediately after the war, further dwindling a population that only numbered roughly two hundred, or two percent of the entire population of Newport, at its height in the early 1770s.<sup>294</sup> The Newport congregation chose to decline to contribute to the address, expressing regret in potentially delaying an address from other Jewish congregations “which could with propriety have address’d him.” That Seixas’ had misgivings about how his Protestant neighbors would react to the congregation even contributing to a joint address suggests a vulnerability wildly at odds with the impression often given in both historiography and public history of a warm climate of acceptance at the time of Washington’s visit. Of course, it nearly goes without saying that none of the Protestant churches in Newport deferred to Yeshuat Israel in their decisions about addressing Washington. My intention is not to suggest that Seixas, or any members of the congregation, were weak or cowardly, but rather that historians ought not take the precarious and vulnerable situation of the Jewish community in Newport for granted. Seixas’ caution suggests that the community was not simply small and forgotten in a benign way; if they were, Seixas would not have had any reason to fear.

Seixas’ response then turned from polite and deferential to mildly accusatory, pointing out that because of its size and location, the New York congregation ought to have taken the initiative to address the president themselves. However, he then writes that the Newport congregation consented to be named in the address, without contributing to

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<sup>294</sup> Ellen Smith and George M. Goodwin, eds., *The Jews of Rhode Island* (Brandeis, 2004), p. 2. The entire Jewish population of the thirteen colonies that eventually became the United States amounted to somewhere between 1,500 and 2,500, “less than one-half of 1 percent of the total white population” in 1775 (Hirschfeld, p. 13).

the draft. The congregation was “sensible it can be well composed at your place,” with adequate attention to “the Enfranchisement which is Secured to us Jews by the Federal Constitution.” He added that the Newport congregation would like a copy.

Seixas disagreed with the New York trustees about the Georgians’ independent actions. “They had an undoubted right to do as they did—If any regular system was to be adopted, it was incumbent on you from your Local Situation, & as being the Eldest Congregation within the United States of America, to have form’d that system.” Georgia acted because New York “procrastinated,” and it was reasonable for other congregations to act when leadership from New York was absent. He then apologizes for his harsh language; “the dignity of my native congregation, may perhaps have excited me to write with more freedom than was actually necessary.”<sup>295</sup> Rhode Islanders took keen notice of the developments in Georgia; The *Providence Gazette* printed the Savannah congregation’s address to Washington that so upset New York, followed by Washington’s response.<sup>296</sup> Penned by president of the Savannah congregation Levi Sheftal, the address is short, mostly laudatory, and apologetic about the delay due to their “excentric [sic] situation.” It expressed confidence in and gratitude for Washington’s commitment to combating “bigotry,” “superstition,” and “enthusiasm.” The address also refers to the highest power as “the Deity” and “the great Author of worlds,” in similar language to the Newport Freemasons and Yeshuat Israel. As was the case for Newport, Washington’s

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<sup>295</sup> Letter from M. Seixas, Newport to K.K.S.I. regarding letter to Pres. Washington, July 2, 1790, American Jewish Historical Society via Jewish Life in America database.

<sup>296</sup> *Providence Gazette*, July 3, 1790, p. 1. As the *Gazette* also appears to be the first paper to have printed the Newport congregation’s exchange with Washington, Providence papers appear to more readily print addresses between Jewish congregations and Washington than Newport papers. I have yet to uncover or discern a plausible reason why that was the case.

response mostly mirrored the congregation's language and themes in affirmation. Were it not for New York's indignance, nothing about this exchange suggested controversy.

Both Newport and Charleston grew impatient with New York. Receiving the same letter from New York as the Rhode Island congregation, Charleston replied in mid-July. They never heard back. On November 20, 1790, they reminded New York that they had not heard any developments on the address, and requested that they not be included, "as we think it has been too tardy in the delivery."<sup>297</sup> Frustrated with the delays in New York, Newport decided not to wait. As Seixas expressed in his response to New York, their principal reason for hesitation was stepping on the toes of "Large Bodies in this State" by making a statement to the president before anyone else did. However, Washington's visit provided an opportunity for them to do so alongside other Newporters, rendering the concern of inappropriately acting without them moot.

The Newport congregation's decisions prioritized their relationship to the prevailing Protestant powers in early national Rhode Island. One could interpret that the Newport congregation must have had a more harmonious relationship with these powers than other places if they held it in such high esteem. And yet, from another point of view, it does not reflect well on the Newport congregation's place in the community that it seemed so fearful of offending Protestants, who likely did not hold the wishes or feelings of the Jewish community in equally high esteem. For all congregations involved, Protestant establishment—even if, in Newport's case, informal—shaped their

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<sup>297</sup> Letter of K.K. Beth Elohim Charleston, regarding address to George Washington, November 20, 1790, Jewish Life in America database. They did, however, apparently join with Richmond and Philadelphia in a later address—see footnote 17.

participation, demonstrating that Jewish Americans struggled to assert their communities' interests on their own terms.

### **Rhode Island in the Baptist Revolutionary Network**

Perhaps New York, not Newport, was the acknowledged leader of Jewish America in the Revolutionary era and early republic, but Rhode Island Baptists were well positioned to coordinate Baptists throughout England's North American colonies during the imperial crises leading up to the war. Baptists in English North America outside of Rhode Island were few and far between before the First Great Awakening. As churches appeared throughout the rest of New England, the mid-Atlantic, and the South, Baptists looked to Rhode Island for support, as they had been shoring up community and resources for over a century. Although, as J. Stanley Lemons argues, Baptist historians tend to "treat Rhode Island as a bystander" in favor of the South because of Baptists' explosive growth in the region during the mid to late eighteenth century, Rhode Island Baptists had entrenched history on their side.<sup>298</sup> Urban and educated Baptists in Rhode Island took it upon themselves to support and coordinate with Baptists elsewhere in New England and English North America, forming associations, both formal and informal, that offered financial support, political solidarity, and respectability.

Yet at the same time that Rhode Island's robust Baptist history made it possible to build networks with other Baptists, Baptist flourishing in Rhode Island also led to a strong polarization between rural, Six-Principle Baptists and urban Baptists. Baptists in Newport and Providence believed in maintaining an educated, professional ministry (for

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<sup>298</sup> J. Stanley Lemons, *Retracing Baptists in Rhode Island: Identity, Formation, and History* (Baylor University Press, 2019).

which purpose Rhode Island College, later Brown, was founded), incorporated aspects of worship that mirrored those of the British Empire's more mainstream denominations (such as hymn singing), and dropped the sixth principle (laying of the hands).<sup>299</sup> Rural Six-Principle Baptists in Rhode Island typically distrusted educated, paid clergy; most worship services were held by a self-appointed Elder, often in his own home. It was urban, educated, five-principle Baptists that formed associations to coordinate with Baptists in other colonies during the American Revolution, while ignoring rural Rhode Island Baptists, before turning to missionary efforts to reform rural Rhode Island Baptists in the early republic.<sup>300</sup> This indicates that urban Baptists in Rhode Island were as concerned with legitimacy and respectability as Baptist solidarity in and of itself. Creating an intercolonial coalition of Baptists, while leaving behind locals they considered embarrassing and backward, could garner Baptists recognition as a significant denomination equally worthy of broad political participation as Anglicans and Congregationalists. Like the new United States, these Baptists aimed for acknowledgement among the powers of the earth. Revolutionary-era Baptist activity in Rhode Island demonstrated that a denominations' hegemony could not only survive, but thrive, in the absence of formal state establishment.

The establishment of Rhode Island College in 1764 represented a launch point for organization and community among Baptists throughout English North America. Rhode Island College, now Brown University, owes its inception to the Philadelphia

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<sup>299</sup> For more detailed explanations of the theological and liturgical differences among Baptists, see James C. Blaylock, *Baptist Groups in America* (Jacksonville, TX: Baptist Missionary Association Theological Seminary, 2005). Six-Principle Baptist theology and history is covered on pp. 38-39.

<sup>300</sup> See chapter 5, "Religious and Cultural Transformation" in Daniel P. Jones, *The Economic and Social Transformation of Rural Rhode Island, 1780-1850* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), pp. 131-171.



Association, which, after successfully creating a Baptist grammar school, Hopewell Academy, saw the worth and necessity of formal education in Baptist circles. The Philadelphia Association cited the need for Baptists to be “clear in the doctrines of grace,” but also considered that if they did not have schools and colleges of their own, that Baptist students seeking an education would be easily swayed to Anglicanism or Congregationalism. As “the Baptists in general have been so much abused, by those who boast of their *Learning*,” they needed their own learned adherents to counter the charge that Baptists were necessarily more ignorant and other denominations necessarily more enlightened. Furthermore, the Association saw that the Howell Academy had impressively produced numerous “able” pastors. Founding a college could only promise more, and with a further geographic reach. Members of the Philadelphia Association suggested Rhode Island as an ideal location. It was the only English North American colony that could take on the project as a public, government-supported institution while still under Baptist leadership. As its president, they recommended an alumnus of the Howell Academy who then went on to the College of New Jersey (now Princeton), James Manning.<sup>301</sup> The founding of Rhode Island College more resembled the activities of Anglicans and Congregationalists than harried and isolated dissenters, representing a triumph of intercolonial Baptist coordination, organization, and legitimacy.<sup>302</sup>

Rhode Island College’s founding not only led to tighter bonds between Baptists in Rhode Island and Pennsylvania, but also between Baptists in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. In 1767, three years after the college’s founding, Manning, who was also

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<sup>301</sup> Walter C. Bronson, *The History of Brown University, 1764-1914* (Brown, 1914), p. 4-10.

<sup>302</sup> That being said, The College of New Jersey was founded by New Light Presbyterians. See Thomas Jefferson Wertebaker, *Princeton, 1746-1896* (Princeton, 2014).

the pastor of the Baptist church in Warren, Rhode Island, founded the Warren Association with Massachusetts Baptist Isaac Backus and other prominent Baptists. Although the association had heavy Rhode Island participation and leadership, and some Connecticut and New York participation, many, perhaps even most, members were Baptist pastors in Massachusetts. Meeting minutes generally addressed threats from the Massachusetts government as threats to “our religious liberties” and “our civil liberties,” indicating both that Massachusetts participation was significant, and that members from Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New York saw the cause of Baptists in Massachusetts as their own.

These men formed the Warren Association primarily in response to a specific unfolding crisis. Since 1728, Baptists and other dissenters in Massachusetts were, theoretically, eligible for exemption from paying ministerial taxes that supported Congregational churches. However, in practice, “many assessors rejected the documents on whim or technicality.” Rhode Islanders were familiar with the dynamic of a theoretically fair law that played out unfairly in reality. Votes in gubernatorial elections, held every year, were meant to be cast in Newport, but most eligible freemen cast proxy votes in their town meetings. Candidates strongly encouraged allies at town meetings to come up with any plausible technical reason to throw out proxy votes for the opposing side.<sup>303</sup>

Already in a precarious position, the scales tipped even further against Massachusetts Baptists when the town of Ashfield ended its Baptist exemption in 1767, prompting discussion that other towns would very soon follow. The town of Ashfield seized livestock and land to satisfy back taxes retroactively applied to when the

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<sup>303</sup> David S. Lovejoy, *Rhode Island Politics and the American Revolution, 1760-1776* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1958), p. 26.

exemption existed on the books. Interest in the Baptist cause in Massachusetts was high in Rhode Island. In 1770, the *Providence Gazette* printed an address “to the Baptists in the Province of Massachusetts Bay, who are and have been oppressed in any Way on a religious Account: It would be needless to tell you, that you have long felt the effects of the laws, by which the religion of the government in which you live, is established; your purses have felt the burthens of ministerial rates, and when these would not satisfy your enemies, your property hath been taken from you... These are things you cannot forget.”<sup>304</sup> In 1774, members of the Warren Association travelled to the first Continental Congress in Philadelphia in order to directly confront the Massachusetts delegates about the backsliding of Baptists’ rights in that colony. The Massachusetts delegates, especially John Adams, were mystified by the outrage and expressed pessimism that anything could be done to remedy it. Adams especially condemned the passion and high tempers in the exchange—which would particularly sting for a Rhode Islander sensitive to the colony’s reputation of incivility.<sup>305</sup>

Not all Rhode Islanders were impressed with the efforts to supposedly rescue Massachusetts Baptists from the jaws of their tyrannical colonial government, echoing the cynicism treated at greater length later in this chapter. A reader of the *Providence Gazette*, who signed as “A.” and whose religious affiliation is unknown, wrote to the editor to caution him and his readership against being seduced by rhetoric of oppression and hardship. “The province of Massachusetts-Bay has made all reasonable provision,

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<sup>304</sup> *Providence Gazette*, August 11, 1770, p. 3. The address is not signed, but it ends with “Boston, July 31, 1770,” implying that it was written in Boston by non-Baptist residents of Boston.

<sup>305</sup> The Ashfield crisis and the meeting of Warren Association members with Massachusetts delegates are covered in Joshua Shepherd, “‘Ye Are Called Unto Liberty’: Revolution, Religious Freedom, and Massachusetts Bay,” *Baptist History and Heritage* (Fall 2015): 4-14.

that the different denominations therein should be freed from paying a farthing towards ministerial support, where they do not belong. How then is the legislature to blame...? If any person is a sufferer, by the misconduct or ill-will of a constable or collector, the law hath sufficiently provided for his remedy.” In other words, if the persecution Baptists were facing was already illegal, seek legal remedies. They “not only have the fullest liberty to believe for themselves, and worship as they please, but they have been encouraged in erecting places for public worship.” From this perspective, the Massachusetts Baptists were doing just fine. “The evident design of the remarker was to touch the passions of his readers, and raise their resentment against that sect he has so great an abhorrence of,” i.e., Congregationalists. As this reader saw it, Massachusetts Baptists conjured manufactured outrage over a non-existent problem. Finally, the reader concluded by reminding fellow readers of the *Gazette* that all of this was happening “in a different government, where they altogether unacquainted and unconnected with the affair referred to.”<sup>306</sup> In twenty-first-century parlance, Rhode Island Baptists were virtue signaling. Later, Rhode Island loyalists would largely stick to the very same line of argument: cries of persecution, especially those related to religious liberty, were nothing but whining.

As word of the Warren Association’s activities spread, Baptist associations sprang up elsewhere throughout the Mid-Atlantic and the South. Rhode Island Baptists took notice. In the 1775 annual meeting minutes, Backus, clerk of the Association, recorded, “We received a letter from the association of Charlestown, in South-Carolina... wherein they manifest their desire to open a correspondence with us, and express their sympathy

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<sup>306</sup> *Providence Gazette*, March 19, 1774, p. 2.

with us in troubles, and a willingness to do any thing in their power for our relief. We fully concurred with the proposal of a correspondence, and returned them an answer by our beloved brother who brought it.”<sup>307</sup> Given that Rhode Island Baptists faced far fewer obstacles to their organizing and worship than most Baptists in America, it is surprising that Baptists in South Carolina, where the Anglican church was not disestablished until 1790, would offer “any thing in their power for [their] relief.” They likely meant to communicate their intention to aid Massachusetts Baptists, but one could interpret this gesture by South Carolina as a gracious and diplomatic way of initiating Rhode Island Baptists coming to *their* aid if needed.

In expressing their concern for fellow Baptists in the South, Rhode Island Baptists demonstrated how their unique situation influenced their perspective of the plight of Baptists elsewhere. In October of 1771, the *Providence Gazette* published Baptists’ concern that fellow Baptists “are suffering great persecution for want of a toleration law in Virginia,” and that Virginia Baptists were “falsly accused with many things touching our tenets and practices.”<sup>308</sup> While technically true that Virginia had a toleration law, modeled on the 1689 Toleration Act in England, from the perspective of Rhode Island Baptists that experienced completely unrestricted freedom of worship, the Virginia situation was dire. For Rhode Islanders to describe this situation as virtually not having a toleration law at all highlights how a Rhode Island definition of “toleration” departed significantly from the accepted definition elsewhere. In part due to this intercolonial attention and pressure, Virginia passed another Act of Toleration in 1772. However, this act “set up dissenting Christians for failure by restricting the licensing process, limiting

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<sup>307</sup> Minutes of the Proceedings of the Baptist Association at Warren, September 12 and 13, 1775.

<sup>308</sup> *Providence Gazette*, October 5, 1771, p. 2.

their outreach to their local area,” and other restrictions not included in the original toleration act.<sup>309</sup>

Baptist organizing simultaneously grew more regionally coherent and more local and chaotic. The address to Massachusetts Baptists printed in the *Providence Gazette* quoted above ended with a call to bring cases to a “Baptist Association” meeting in Bellingham, Massachusetts.<sup>310</sup> This association apparently had no connection to the Warren Association. At the same time that urban Baptists organized across colonies, rural Baptists left behind by this push formed their own associations. Six-Principle Baptists in rural Rhode Island formed the Baptist Yearly Meeting in 1774, patterning their association off the yearly meetings of Friends.<sup>311</sup> This signaled that they had more in common with the other hinterland denomination of their colony, the Quakers, than with the cosmopolitan-oriented Warren Association.

As Baptist organizing flourished, Baptists began to solidify their understandings of religious liberty. J. Stanley Lemons argues that late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Baptists, especially in Rhode Island, were instrumental in forging a conception of religious liberty in the new United States that meant protecting a Protestant influence in government, even if the government maintained no established church headed by a

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<sup>309</sup> Laverne Young Smith, “Regular Baptists in Colonial Anglican Virginia: Civil Obedience During Religious Toleration.” Dissertation, University of Birmingham, March 2020, p. 7. Smith also highlights that the Virginia law forbid preaching to enslaved people. For more on Virginia Baptists’ legal situation, see Rhys Isaac, “Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists’ Challenge to the Traditional Order in Virginia, 1765 to 1775,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 31, No. 3 (July 1974): 345-368; John A. Ragosta, “Fighting for Freedom: Virginia Dissenters’ Struggle for Religious Liberty during the American Revolution,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 116, No. 3 (2008): 226-261. For more on Baptist organizing in Virginia, see J. Stephen Kroll-Smith, “Transmitting a Revival Culture: The Organizational Dynamic of the Baptist Movement in Colonial Virginia, 1760-1777,” *The Journal of Southern History* 50, No. 4 (November 1984): 551-568.

<sup>310</sup> *Providence Gazette*, August 11, 1770, p. 3.

<sup>311</sup> Jones, 132. Six-Principle Baptists also formed an earlier short-lived organization that encompassed Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island (see William G. McLoughlin, “The First Calvinistic Baptist Association in New England, 1754?-1767,” *Church History* 36, No. 4 (December 1967): 410-418.

specific denomination.<sup>312</sup> Rhode Island College lent a hand in forging this consensus among Baptists. As the College was founded as both a public college in a colony with no established church and a college with an explicit religious affiliation, this line of thinking naturally followed. Two commencement addresses, both delivered at the Baptist church in Providence twenty-seven years apart, demonstrate the evolution of this conception during the Revolution and early Republic.

In 1771, valedictorian Barnabas Binney delivered “A Plea, for the Right of Private Judgment in Religious Matters.” It is possible that Binney’s choice of topic was in some way influenced by a controversy covered in the *Newport Mercury* the previous year. The *Mercury* reprinted a letter from the *South Carolina Gazette*, a paper as connected to Charleston’s Baptist community as the *Mercury* was to Rhode Island’s, penned by Massachusetts Baptist pastor Hezekiah Smith. Smith complained that Rhode Island College “had been misrepresented” as an institution “designed only for the benefit of the Baptists.” He cited the institution’s charter, which promised that no student will ever be administered a test of religion and shall “enjoy full, free, absolute, and uninterrupted liberty of conscience.” The doors were open to “all denominations of Protestants.”<sup>313</sup> Rhode Island College’s original charter did, in fact, prohibit religious tests and stated that “the places of Professors, Tutors, and all other offices, the President alone excepted, shall be free and open for all denominations of Protestants, and that youth of all religious denominations shall and may be freely admitted.” Importantly, in the eighteenth century,

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<sup>312</sup> J. Stanley Lemons, *Retracing Baptists in Rhode Island: Identity, Formation, and History* (Baylor University Press, 2019).

<sup>313</sup> *Newport Mercury*, March 5, 1770, p. 4.

this was true of all colleges in English colonial North America except for Yale.<sup>314</sup> This defense implies a series of interesting facets of the situation. First, that there were students, or interested prospective students, of Rhode Island College who were not Baptist.<sup>315</sup> Second, that chatter existed that these students or prospective students faced discrimination despite such discrimination being prohibited on paper. Third, that this chatter made its way into Baptist communities across the East Coast. And finally, that Rhode Island Baptists were aware of, and felt the need to comment on, the situation. Importantly, this situated liberty of conscience as not incongruent with an institution that held explicit ties to a religious denomination.

The latter of the two addresses, instead of making apologies for a religious organization, takes a much firmer position that freedom of religion meant the freedom of religion to influence government. “An Oration Urging the Necessity of Religion as the Only Permanent Basis of Civil Government,” delivered at the 1798 commencement by valedictorian Otis Thompson, first and foremost makes clear that “civil” is not synonymous with secular or irreligious, an important qualifier in Rhode Island’s seventeenth-century establishment of a completely “civil” government, not headed by a specific denomination but never intended to be separate from religion, as I argue in chapter one. “All who regard the happiness of our favoured land, or who wish to

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<sup>314</sup> Walter C. Bronson, *The History of Brown University, 1764-1914* (Brown, 1914), p. 4. Bronson contends that Harvard never had a formal religious test, although the Dunster controversy and the creation of Yale both point to intolerance for perceived unorthodoxy at seventeenth-century Harvard. Bronson points out that one scholarship available to Harvard students in the eighteenth century explicitly favored Baptist applicants. William and Mary apparently never had a religious test, though, like Harvard, was founded to educate ministers and promote conversion of Native Americans. In *Beyond Toleration: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism* (Oxford, 2006), Chris Beneke points out that colleges founded in eighteenth-century British North America were founded with explicit language allowing for religious diversity among the student body (p. 98-99).

<sup>315</sup> Although I have been unable to find any evidence about the diversity of the student body, the General Assembly “mandated that a fixed proportion of Quakers, Congregationalists, and Anglicans be appointed as trustees to the Baptist-dominated college” (Beneke, p. 98).



perpetuate the blessings of *Liberty*, ought to come forward, at this period of degeneracy, and strenuously to oppose an idea, so absurd, so fatal, as that a republican government can be maintained without the aid and supportive energy of Religion.” He argued that a people could not trust a government with no religious influence, and that laws with no religious backing carried little weight, because people had no personal or existential reason to follow them, other than to avoid earthly punishment. Without religion, what was to guide the creation of laws? He pointed to post-Revolutionary France as an example of how people behave when the government completely lacks religion, an interesting angle considering the previous two centuries of decrying tyrannical Catholic monarchies.

One Baptist outside of Rhode Island also commented on how Rhode Island’s historic legal situation did more to harm Baptists than protect them. English author and Baptist pastor Anthony Robinson wrote, “So watchful of the laws, over clerical donation,” are the Rhode Island Baptists, that their contracts for salaries had little protection, and disputes could not be heard in court.<sup>316</sup> The laws that Baptists must be so “watchful” of were those that separated civil and religious authority, which, as Robinson claims, hindered them more than they helped. A secular, civil government is cast here as an impediment to Baptists’ thriving, an impressive pivot from decrying the inadequate toleration laws of places like Massachusetts and Virginia. What Robinson envisions as the alternative is not clear. He does not contend that Baptists in colonies, and later states, with Episcopal or Congregational establishments were better off than Rhode Island Baptists. Nowhere in colonial America or the new United States had Baptists been the

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<sup>316</sup> Anthony Robinson, *A Short History of the Persecution of the Christians by Jews, Heathens, and Christians* (Carlisle, England: F. Jollie, 1793), p. 126.

established denomination of an entire colony or state.<sup>317</sup> Robinson does not come out and say that he wishes that to be the case, but there are few other conclusions a reader can draw from his argument.

At the same time that Rhode Island's religious liberty threatened Baptists, so too did the excessive religious enthusiasm of some Baptists, which some Rhode Islanders contended drove people to irreligion. Six-Principle Baptists went through a boom and bust in the late eighteenth through the turn of the nineteenth century in rural Rhode Island. During the 1810s and 1820s, rural Rhode Island's "traditional Baptist sects reached a deep state of decay" after having peaked in the 1770s.<sup>318</sup> Few attended meetings and used them almost exclusively for socializing when they did, with little to no decorum or etiquette of any kind observed. Most rural Rhode Islanders "lacked basic knowledge of the fundamentals of Christian theology" and exhibited "hostility" toward religion. Baptist and Congregational missionaries observed "a sort of commonsense deism." These missionaries blamed the descent into irreligion on the "irregular conduct" of unorthodox, if enthusiastic and passionate, preachers.<sup>319</sup> In response, two missionary societies, the Baptist State Convention, established in 1825, which absorbed the Warren Association, and the Rhode Island Domestic Missionary Society, a Congregational missionary society originally formed in 1803 as the Rhode Island Missionary Society and

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<sup>317</sup> This statement comes with two exceptions for town-level establishment. In Swansea, Massachusetts, the Baptist church was supported by local taxes because the town was majority Baptist and, technically, nothing in colonial Massachusetts law after 1692 prevented non-Congregational churches from being tax supported if it was the town's most well-attended church. At least one Anglican church was tax supported in Massachusetts this way. See Michael W. McConnell, "Establishment and Disestablishment at the Founding, Part I: Establishment of Religion," *William and Mary Law Review* 44, no. 5 (April 2003): 2123. However, McConnell's statement that this represented "the only Baptist established church in the world" is incorrect. When the Plymouth colony began supporting ministers with taxes, some of them were Baptist—see J. M. Bumsted, "A Well-Bound Toleration: Church and State in the Plymouth Colony," *Journal of Church and State* 10, no. 2 (Spring 1968): 265-279.

<sup>318</sup> Jones, p. 136.

<sup>319</sup> Jones, p. 137.

renamed to include its domestic angle in 1821, poured significant resources into bringing rural Rhode Islanders into respectable, regular, and orthodox expressions of Protestant Christianity.<sup>320</sup>

J. Stanley Lemons argues that during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, “most Baptists had arrived at a place where they held some views that [Roger] Williams would have regarded as blasphemous,” contending that Williams never believed in the type of Christian nationalism expressed by Baptists during that period.<sup>321</sup> Williams’ clearest disagreement with turn-of-the-nineteenth-century Baptists would have been on the issue of a paid, professional clergy; while Williams himself was well-educated and valued education, he stridently opposed churches paying their pastors, seeing the ideal pastor as someone who made his own living during the week. Chapter two of this dissertation includes a more thorough explanation of what we know of Williams’ views regarding the relationship between religion and government. In that chapter, I contend that Williams did believe that a broad Protestant consensus should undergird civil government; he aimed to curtail specific denominations from becoming official churches of the civil government, not rid government of religion altogether. In a strictly theological and philosophical sense, I disagree with Lemons that Williams would not have endorsed most of the ideas in Otis Thompson’s valedictorian speech. It is not, as he contends, a “great irony” that Williams’ early biographers “championed the idea of a Christian political union to dominate government.”<sup>322</sup> At the same time, Lemons’ observations of the differences between Williams and later Baptists highlight what he calls the “sad truth”

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<sup>320</sup> Jones, p. 133-134.

<sup>321</sup> Lemons, p. 4.

<sup>322</sup> Lemons, p. 5.

that “where Baptists have become the majority, they have behaved much like the old state churches.”<sup>323</sup>

How late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Baptists most resembled Williams was in their self-consciousness and insecurity with the reputation that liberty of conscience created conditions for irreligion. Missionaries in the 1830s warned that “we cannot forget that [this] is the land of Roger Williams, nor are we insensible to reproach which has been cast upon us, on account of the many disagreeable things which are said to result from the prevalence of our principles.”<sup>324</sup> I argued in chapter two that the reputation that Rhode Island developed for anarchy is misremembered as being tied to Williams and Providence and was instead aimed specifically at antinomian Rhode Island settlers who did not intend to establish a colony of religious liberty in the first place, but clearly that misplaced association was already established by the early nineteenth century.

### **A View of the World of Religious Liberty from Rhode Island**

When one takes stock of discussion of religious liberty in Revolutionary era Rhode Island newspapers, what stands out is the overwhelming attention to international issues of religious liberty. “Toleration” was mentioned at least one hundred and sixty-four times in Rhode Island newspapers between 1770 and 1800; discussion of international issues of religious toleration account for nearly seventy of those instances—almost half. Rhode Island papers covered discussion of religious liberty in England, Ireland, France, Rome, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Russia, Prussia, Hungary, Poland, Turkey, St. Lucia,

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<sup>323</sup> Lemons, p. 8.

<sup>324</sup> Jones, 135.

Bermuda, and Sierra Leone. In all of these places, questions of toleration and established church came to a head.

Americans tended to see this as due to their own influence. The *Newport Mercury* and *Providence Gazette* published the following on Germany: “The progress of society will be accelerated by centuries, by this revolution—The Emperor of Germany is adopting, as fast he can, American ideas of toleration and religious liberty, and it will become the fashionable system of all Europe very soon,” and many similar expressions followed in other papers.<sup>325</sup> Americans saw religious liberty in France as their export. A reader of the *Mercury* wrote to the printer, “To America it is, perhaps, owing, that France, a country whose national religion denied the blessing of toleration, now enjoys religious liberty in its full and unbounded extent.”<sup>326</sup> This American phenomenon “has penetrated even into Turkey—where the Grand Seignior has forbidden any Insults being offered to the Christians by the Musselmen.”<sup>327</sup> The same was attributed to the Catholic relief bill in Ireland, which, although defeated, marked a significant change in attitude toward religious liberty.<sup>328</sup> An Englishman wrote to his friend in Massachusetts, “You have had the glory of giving the first example of it to the world; and I believe hitherto there has been no reason to suppose that even in point of policy you have been wrong. The French, who, to the destruction of their grand monarch, seemed to have imbibed all your opinions, have adopted the same plan—and even nuns may now choose between reason and superstition.”<sup>329</sup> A British paper praised the United States for “rejecting mere

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<sup>325</sup> *Providence Gazette*, April 27, 1782, p. 3; *Newport Mercury*, April 27, 1782, p. 3.

<sup>326</sup> *Newport Mercury*, September 20, 1790, p. 1.

<sup>327</sup> *United States Chronicle* (Providence), April 5, 1792, p. 3; *Herald of the United States* (Providence), April 7, 1792, p. 3.

<sup>328</sup> *Newport Mercury*, April 16, 1792, p. 3; *Newport Mercury*, April 30, 1792, p. 2.

<sup>329</sup> *Newport Herald*, June 10, 1790, p. 3.

toleration” and placing “upon one common and equal footing every church, sect, or society of religious men.”<sup>330</sup> Americans complained that “the subject and advantage of toleration are very little understood by the orators of England. The late King of Prussia was the only Prince of modern times, and could avail himself of all its advantages.”<sup>331</sup> European religious liberty came squarely from America; England was behind.

But this meant that America needed to live up to its example. In commenting on the Anglican/Episcopal controversy in the wake of independence from Britain, an extract in the *United States Chronicle* reads: “It was supposed that a spirit of toleration and philanthropy had, as one happy consequence of the late revolution, extended its empire over these States, and set an example to infatuate Europe. The conduct of the inhabitants of Boston seems in some measure to give the lie to this supposition,” in harassment of Seabury for his beliefs about ordination and how to save the Anglican church in the new United States.<sup>332</sup>

American exceptionalism vis-a-vis religious liberty was particularly attractive to Rhode Island readers with an idea of themselves as the origin point of religious liberty in America itself. If European religious liberty came from the United States, then it really came from Rhode Island. Recent scholarship on the American Revolution in an international context complicates the image of the United States as the origin point of a spread of revolutionary activity around the globe. Instead, the United States—including its commitment to religious liberty—was simply one place among many caught in a wave of

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<sup>330</sup> *Providence Gazette*, June 20, 1795, p. 1.

<sup>331</sup> *Providence Gazette*, 30 June 1787, p. 1; *Newport Herald*, July 5, 1787, p. 3; *Newport Mercury*, July 9, 1787, p. 2.

<sup>332</sup> *United States Chronicle* (Providence), May 11, 1786, p. 2; *Newport Mercury*, 29 May 1786, p. 2.

influence over the entire Atlantic world. Yet this view of the world from Rhode Island helped solidify its mythical conception.

### **Cautions from the Past**

The American Revolution prompted many British colonial Americans to examine the past in order to make sense of their present. Facing an uncertain future, they looked to precedents from history for guidance. To make sense of the conflict, both patriot and loyalist Rhode Island colonists pulled historical inspiration and insight from the history of colonial Rhode Island, from English colonial American history more broadly, from British history, and from ancient history. In addition to invoking the history of colonial Rhode Island per se, Rhode Islanders invoked other areas of history through the lenses of contemporary Rhode Island concerns and an understanding of Rhode Island's past that had been percolating since the early eighteenth century. The most consistent takeaway of Rhode Islanders' invocations of the past, their own and otherwise, was that lofty promises could be made and broken. Believing in a revolutionary idea was not enough; one important man was not enough. As such, Rhode Islanders were particularly predisposed to wariness toward the aspirations of the patriot cause.

Revolutionary Rhode Islanders had ample reason to be disillusioned with politics in general. The representation in the General Assembly set in absolute, not proportional, terms in the 1663 charter no longer reflected the populations of respective towns. As Newport and Providence's populations soared while their allowed representation in the Assembly remained fixed, rural parts of Rhode Island gained disproportionate influence, incentivizing fierce competition for support from the countryside. The political rivalry between Samuel Ward and Stephen Hopkins held Rhode Island in a vice grip for decades.

Ward, a Baptist from Newport, and Hopkins, a Quaker from Providence, competed for allies among the Newport and Providence elite and resorted to cut-throat and nearly extralegal tactics to gain advantage. Bribery for votes was common and accepted.

According to historian David S. Lovejoy, “neither party embraced a political philosophy challenged by the other.” Competing ideologies might have made voting freemen more inclined to see the contests as worthy, but factions created with political gain as the only discernable motivating factor gave them little to admire. Few qualified freeman bothered to cast votes unless paid to. Some were even paid not to. The almost farcical functions of the charter combined with the effects of this bitter political rivalry gave Rhode Islanders “a reputation for political apathy.”<sup>333</sup>

Although Callender may have been Williams’ original eighteenth-century champion, Isaac Backus and others took up the torch in the Revolutionary era. Williams was a major figure in Backus’s *History of New England with Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians Called Baptists*, first published in 1777. This behemoth volume also makes the claim that the “now flourishing colony” of Rhode Island “was laid upon such principles as no other civil government ever had been, as we know of,” with Roger Williams as the first person to conceptualize it.<sup>334</sup> In 1779, while Rhode Islanders debated whether or not to keep their 1663 colonial charter, the *Providence Gazette* ran a lengthy history of Roger Williams’ persecution in Massachusetts and his exceptionally radical ideas of liberty of conscience in service to arguing that no changes to the charter should be made.<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>333</sup>Lovejoy, p. 13-18.

<sup>334</sup> Isaac Backus, *A History of New-England, with Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians Called Baptists* (Boston: Edward Draper and Phillip Freeman, 1777), p. 95.

<sup>335</sup> *Providence Gazette*, May 19, 1779, p. 1.



While the 1770s narration of the overall series of events of Williams' persecution in Massachusetts and early settlement in Providence largely still matches what historians consider settled fact today, Revolutionary Rhode Islanders displayed a perplexing amnesia regarding the colony's founding documents. As covered previously, Williams first secured a Parliamentary Patent in the early 1640s before the Royal Charter was secured in the early 1660s, but many Revolutionary-era Rhode Islanders wrote as if the Parliamentary Patent never existed. Backus and Callender both mentioned it, but framed it as a tenuous and temporary securement at best.<sup>336</sup> Historian David S. Lovejoy chronicled how Revolutionary Rhode Islanders typically argued against Parliamentary authority by claiming that their colony's authority came from the Crown, not Parliament. In a petition to the King against the Stamp Act, the General Assembly argued that "the original agreement of the early settlers, the petitioners pointed out, was made with the King."<sup>337</sup> In his 1764 pamphlet *The Rights of Colonies Examined*, then-governor Stephen Hopkins forwarded the same argument. As covered in chapter one, given that the Parliamentary Patent was not printed in eighteenth-century volumes of Rhode Island law because it was a dead letter, it is plausible that Hopkins and others genuinely did not know that Rhode Island was founded with a Parliamentary Patent. More likely, however, is that, like Backus and Callender, they did not see that document as a significant and legitimate predecessor to the later Royal Charter.

Although Rhode Islanders seem to have forgotten, or at least dismissed, the role of Parliament in establishing the colony before the charter, they certainly did not forget one of the patent's signers: Oliver Cromwell. During the political and economic crises of

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<sup>336</sup> Backus, p. 269; Callender, p. 5.

<sup>337</sup> Lovejoy, p. 71.

the 1760s and 1770s, many colonists drew parallels to the English Civil Wars, the regicide of Charles I, and the Commonwealth.<sup>338</sup> In New England, few figures in British history loomed as large as Oliver Cromwell.<sup>339</sup> At least fifty-six references to Cromwell appear in Rhode Island newspapers between 1760 and 1800, almost all of them unique. Cromwell's status as a universally maligned figure took on particular significance in Rhode Island due to the cynicism toward Rhode Island's own colonial history that historians like Callender and Backus attempted to sand over. Just as Williams' "lively experiment" had been a disappointment to some, so, too, had Cromwell's Commonwealth—and, potentially, a newly-independent American nation.

New England colonists largely supported Parliament over Charles I during the English Civil Wars, penned scriptural justifications for Charles I's execution, and prayed and fasted for the success of the Commonwealth. Thanksgiving and fast days in support of Parliament became routine in Massachusetts Bay, with twelve fast days in 1644 alone. The Connecticut and New Haven colonies observed monthly fast days. Roughly fifteen hundred New England colonists traveled to England to serve in the New Model Army.<sup>340</sup> Many New England colonists adored the Lord Protector. Cromwell appeared in a dream

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<sup>338</sup> See chapter three, "The British Past in the Imperial Crisis" in Michael D. Hattem, *Past and Prologue: Politics and Memory in the American Revolution* (Yale, 2020). While arguing for the centrality of alluding to British history in the Patriot cause, Hattem also argues that the shift away from invoking British history to constructing a coherent narrative of a distinctly British colonial past "did not happen overnight when the colonists declared independence in 1776" (p. 97). See also, James C. Spalding, "Loyalist as Royalist, Patriot as Puritan: The American Revolution as a Repetition of the English Civil Wars," *Church History* 45, No. 73 (September 1976): 329-340.

<sup>339</sup> For Cromwell's popularity in Revolutionary-era New England, see Alfred F. Young, "Tar and Feathers and the Ghost of Oliver Cromwell: English Plebeian Culture and American Radicalism" in *Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution* (NYU, 2006); Francis J. Bremer, "Cromwell's Ghost: The Legacy of England's Puritan Revolution in New England," in Jane A. Mills, ed., *Cromwell's Legacy* (Manchester University Press, 2012). Young argues that praise of Cromwell was unheard of among patriots before 1774, and came about suddenly, but Bremer brings to light earlier evidence of patriot praise for Cromwell. For Cromwell's legacy in British colonial America as a whole, see Peter Karsten, "Cromwell in America" in R.C. Richardson, ed., *Images of Oliver Cromwell: Essays for and by Roger Howell, Jr.* (Manchester University Press, 1993); Blair Worden, *Roundhead Reputations: The English Civil Wars and the Passions of Posterity* (New York: Penguin, 2001).

<sup>340</sup> Bremer, 242-3.

to Rhode Islander Peter Easton in 1668 with limbs of olive branches, representing the olive branch he extended to puritans and other dissenters.<sup>341</sup> Rhode Island was no exception. Cromwell was among roughly a dozen Members of Parliament listed as Commissioners in Rhode Island's 1643 Parliamentary Patent. With the first English Civil War already underway, Roger Williams sought support for these young English settlements among likeminded Puritans on the Parliamentary side; Williams and Cromwell met personally on several occasions during his stay in London.<sup>342</sup> Furthermore, Cromwell and Williams shared similar perspectives on liberty of conscience.

Cromwell's popularity in New England remained steady in the immediate aftermath of the Restoration of Charles II in 1660. Rhode Island did, begrudgingly, accept the authority of Charles II, who granted the colony's royal charter in 1663. But the personal connections between Puritans in England and New England remained strong, where many former Roundheads whom Charles II refused to pardon fled.<sup>343</sup> It was not until after rebellion against, and dissolution of, the Dominion of New England established by James II, and subsequently the Glorious Revolution, that opinion in New England turned against the legacy of Cromwell. Francis Bremer argues for three factors influencing this relatively rapid turn in public opinion in the region: firstly, for the rebels who overthrew the unpopular Dominion government, Cromwell represented the image of standing armies and the use of force to maintain legitimacy. Secondly, the Glorious

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<sup>341</sup> Ann Marie Plane, *Dreams and the Invisible World in Colonial New England: Indians, Colonists, and the Seventeenth Century* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), p. 93.

<sup>342</sup> For more detail regarding Williams' puritan networks in London and his meetings with Cromwell, see L. Raymond Camp, *Roger Williams, God's Apostle of Advocacy: Biography and Rhetoric* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989); Edmund S. Morgan, *Roger Williams: The Church and the State* (New York: Harcourt, 1967); Gaustad, *Roger Williams* (New York: Oxford, 2005).

<sup>343</sup> John Dixwell, Edward Whalley, and William Goffe, all of whom participated in Charles I's execution, fled to New England, Dixwell to Connecticut, Whalley and Goffe to Boston. Karsten, 207.

Revolution, establishing constitutional monarchy, restored the reputation of the Crown. Thirdly, the Dominion of New England introduced the Church of England into the region. Even after its dissolution, Anglicanism began to overtake puritanism in New England—even in Rhode Island, Anglicanism gained outsized influence over puritans and other dissenters in the colony during this time, and some Rhode Island laws explicitly favored the Church of England. This undercut positive popular opinion based on Cromwell’s protections for dissenting Protestants.<sup>344</sup> However, Cromwell’s popularity in New England did not entirely disappear. Historians argue that the volume of condemnation of Cromwell in eighteenth-century print culture implied a reactionary stance—in other words, there would be no need to condemn him so rigorously in print if he did not enjoy some level of popular support that fell outside of print culture. Indeed, there are printed sources that reference praise for Cromwell in conversational settings.<sup>345</sup> In New England, Oliver endured as a popular boys’ name throughout the eighteenth century, a name seldom used in other regions of colonial America.<sup>346</sup> However, a free black soldier who served in the New Jersey 2nd Continental Regiment was named Oliver Cromwell.<sup>347</sup>

Attitudes toward Cromwell softened in New England during the mid-eighteenth century. Jonathan Edwards compared George Whitefield to Cromwell, and meant it as a compliment to his charismatic leadership—though Whitefield’s enemies quickly seized on it.<sup>348</sup> By the 1760s and ‘70s, praising Cromwell in conversation and print was nowhere near as anathema in New England as it had been since the 1690s. Some historians

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<sup>344</sup> Bremer, 247. Karsten also argues that Cromwell called to mind the dangers of a standing army (p. 211).

<sup>345</sup> Worden, 215.

<sup>346</sup> Karsten, 208; Bremer, 248.

<sup>347</sup> Gail Lumet Buckley, *American Patriots: The Story of Blacks in the Military from the Revolution to Desert Storm* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 20.

<sup>348</sup> Karsten, 211.

attribute this to New England's experience with war. The French and Indian War, in particular, "led to positive evocations of Cromwell as a strong military leader who had been a staunch enemy of the Catholic powers of his time."<sup>349</sup> Just as Cromwell had been a fierce enemy to Catholicism and attempted to obliterate it entirely in Ireland, New England—including Rhode Island—had always been extremely hostile to Catholicism; Rhode Island formally banned Catholicism in the colony in the early eighteenth century. A person dressed as Cornet George Joyce, who had taken Charles I into custody, was a regular character of 1760s Pope's Day parades in Boston. An inn in the city dating to the 1750s bore the name "Cromwell's Head." One could imagine the name not necessarily endorsing Cromwell, perhaps instead celebrating his posthumous beheading, or simply being provocative for the sake of it. But its sign hung so low that all who passed were forced to bow. British officers ordered the sign removed, but innkeeper Joshua Bracket, a member of the Sons of Liberty, replaced it as soon as they withdrew.<sup>350</sup>

Eventually, Cromwell came to be openly invoked in the patriots' cause. John Adams expressed his opinion that Cromwell's government had been "infinitely more glorious and happy than that of his Stuart predecessors."<sup>351</sup> The 1774 pamphlet *The American Chronicle of the Times* by patriot John Leacock featured Cromwell defeating General Gage in battle, establishing himself as Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.<sup>352</sup> A 1765 play written in support of fast day protests against the Stamp Act replaced "Lord" with "Cromwell" in the Anglican liturgy.<sup>353</sup> A loyalist informant at a

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<sup>349</sup> Bremer, 248. Hattem also attributes a rallying around Cromwell in the mid-eighteenth century to war (p. 101).

<sup>350</sup> Karsten, 208; Bremer, 248.

<sup>351</sup> Roger Howell, Jr., *Images of Oliver Cromwell*, p. 71.

<sup>352</sup> Karsten, 209.

<sup>353</sup> Karsten, 208; Bremer, 249; Hattem, 102.

Sons of Liberty meeting in 1769 reported that members expressed their wish to find another Cromwell to take up the patriot cause—though some historians believe this claim may have been exaggerated.<sup>354</sup> Outside of New England, patriots were more likely to invoke the more moderate figures of John Hampden and Algernon Sidney.<sup>355</sup> Rhode Island governor Stephen Hopkins, in his 1764 pamphlet *The Rights of Colonies Examined*, favored Hampden and Sidney over Cromwell, whom he condemned as two-faced and power hungry.<sup>356</sup> When patriots invoked Cromwell negatively, it was usually in order to demonstrate the corruption of Parliament, the body primarily responsible for their complaints. In summary, most New England colonists were enthusiastic Roundheads during Cromwell’s time, condemned him following the Glorious Revolution, began to slowly rehabilitate his image during the eighteenth century, and some patriot New Englanders championed him.

Some newspaper accounts highlighted material culture related to Cromwell. These newspaper entries range from benign to something approaching laudatory. The closest to home comes from Pawtucket innkeeper Constant Martin, who advertised his accommodations “at the Sign of Oliver Cromwell” in 1779.<sup>357</sup> Nothing more about his sign can be discerned from this advertisement, unlike the Cromwell’s Head inn in Boston, but one can assume that Martin must have held some degree of reverence for the Lord Protector. Rhode Island newspaper readers also kept abreast of Cromwell’s material culture around the Atlantic world. News from London included the sale of shillings from

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<sup>354</sup> Howell, 71; Karsten, 208; Bremer, 249; Hattem, 102. Howell took the report at face value, Karsten and Bremer state that it is likely exaggerated, and Hattem implies exaggeration in citing its context in typical royalist rhetoric.

<sup>355</sup> Karsten, 207, 210.

<sup>356</sup> Hattem, 103; Karsten, 211.

<sup>357</sup> *American Journal and General Advertiser* (Providence), September 23, 1779, p. 3.

the Commonwealth era that bore Cromwell's likeness.<sup>358</sup> Rhode Island papers kept tabs on the production of a marble bust of Cromwell in London for the King of Prussia, at the King's request,<sup>359</sup> noting that Voltaire composed a "very spirited inscription" for the bust.<sup>360</sup> Rhode Island papers reported that the "honorable society" of Lincoln's Inn Chapel in London decided to repair the gravestone of Cromwell's secretary, John Thurlow, as well as renovate the chambers at No. 6 in the "Old Court, commonly called Cromwell's chambers," where he studied English law and the English constitution.<sup>361</sup> Papers also reference Samuel Cooper's painting of Cromwell; the *Newport Mercury* reported that "when the King of Denmark was shewn" Cooper's portrait, "he turned to one of his nobles, and said, *He makes me tremble!* A proper sensation for a despotic Monarch at the sight of that fierce republican."<sup>362</sup> This could be interpreted as praise for Cromwell, but it is worth considering historians' interpretations of a similar contemporary Cromwell reference. In a 1765 speech, Patrick Henry was reported to have warned George III that he ought to take a lesson from Charles I on the consequences of tyranny. Some listeners interpreted the speech as merely warning about, but not necessarily wishing for, the possibility of another Cromwell, while others took it as praise—a similar possibility for the mention of Cromwell at the Boston Sons of Liberty meeting.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> *Newport Mercury*, May 2, 1763, p. 2.

<sup>359</sup> *Newport Mercury*, October 14, 1765, p. 1.

<sup>360</sup> *Newport Mercury*, November 4, 1765, p. 2.

<sup>361</sup> *Newport Mercury*, November 17, 1766, p. 2.

<sup>362</sup> *Newport Mercury*, November 28, 1768, p. 1.

<sup>363</sup> For analysis on Henry's speech that invoked Cromwell, see John A. Ragosta, "'Ceasar had his Brutus: 'What did Patrick Henry Really Say?'" *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 126, No. 3 (2018), pp. 282-297.

Many newspaper references intended to highlight Cromwell's historicity, playing on the novelty that while the Commonwealth was, by then, in the purview of historians, it was not so long ago. In 1766, the *Providence Gazette* reported that "last week died at Tipperary, Thomas Winsloe, Esq; aged 146 years; he was captain in the reign of King Charles I, and came with Oliver Cromwell a lieutenant-colonel into Ireland."<sup>364</sup> In 1790, the *Mercury* printed the story of Mr. John Hartop, one hundred and thirty-seven years old, who not only "perfectly remembers the great fire in London" but also married an "illegitimate daughter of Oliver Cromwell." He claimed to still possess Cooper's portrait of "the Usurper."<sup>365</sup> In 1786, the *Mercury* published an account of an Irish man who told of how Cromwell's forces seized his family's estate, but the family managed to rebuild their wealth.<sup>366</sup> In 1772, the *Mercury* announced the death of William Cromwell, one of his great grandsons, pointing out that only two others of the "male line" survived.<sup>367</sup> The veracity of some of these accounts is beside the point that Cromwell's life and memory was not so distant in the past. These anecdotes reminded late eighteenth-century readers that they still retained a tether to the seventeenth century and the Commonwealth.

But Cromwell was more than just a reminder of the uncanny passage of time. Cromwell also functioned as a short hand for corruption and despotism dressed up as liberty. Both patriots and loyalists portrayed him this way, but loyalists especially emphasized this. The loyalist paper the *Newport Gazette* printed a letter "A RECEIPT [recipe] to make a WHIG." The recipe reads: "Take the heart of an old Hypocrite, a Pound of Disloyalty, a Pound of Conspiracy, two Ounces of Distraction, three Handfulls

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<sup>364</sup> *Providence Gazette*, November 1, 1766, p. 2.

<sup>365</sup> *Newport Mercury*, May 31, 1790, p. 1.

<sup>366</sup> *Newport Mercury*, June 5, 1786, p. 3.

<sup>367</sup> *Newport Mercury*, October 12, 1772, p. 3.



of Folly, four Drams of the Hatred of Truth, three Scruples of Liars Tongues, Half an Ounce of the Doctrine of a Presbyterian Clergyman, [and] Sixteen Drops of the Spirits of old Oliver Cromwell.”<sup>368</sup> Another letter to the printer, likely written by a loyalist reader as satire, decried the cowardice of moderates, and was signed by “OLIVER CROMWELL,” comparing the zeal of patriots to the figure known widely as despotic.<sup>369</sup> Letters to the *Boston Gazette* around the same time, signed “Oliver Cromwell,” defended the patriot cause in earnest, but I interpret the *Newport Gazette* letter as satirical because the loyalist printer did not otherwise print any letters to him defending the patriot cause. Patriots also warned of Cromwell’s deception. An article printed in the *Providence Gazette* warned, “Julius Ceasar, and Oliver Cromwell, did not dare to assume the title of king,” and yet they still acted as such. “Certain popular points may be left untouched, and yet freedom be extinguished.”<sup>370</sup> Another contended that Cromwell’s hypocrisy was overlooked in his time because “the splendor of his talents hath almost made the horror of his outrages to be forgot.”<sup>371</sup>

The strong influence of the Church of England in late eighteenth-century Rhode Island contributed to the nearly unanimous view of the puritan Cromwell as a bloodthirsty tyrant. An anonymous Rhode Islander responded to Jonathan Mayhew’s criticisms of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts by accusing Mayhew of being no better than a Catholic Inquisition, but mused that at least Mayhew also had no means to stop the SPG, as he did not have Oliver Cromwell “at the Head of

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<sup>368</sup> *Newport Gazette*, February 20, 1777, p. 2.

<sup>369</sup> *Newport Gazette*, May 22, 1777, p. 3.

<sup>370</sup> *Providence Gazette*, March 5, 1768, p. 1.

<sup>371</sup> *Newport Mercury*, July 27, 1767, p. 1.

Forty Thousand Cut-throats, to carry his Measures into Execution.”<sup>372</sup> A particular sticking point for this anonymous writer was Mayhew’s criticism of the propagation of the Church of England.

While Cromwell’s reputation did become somewhat more favorable in Rhode Island papers after the war ended, the fate of the Commonwealth served as a warning to the young United States. In 1788, a reader of the *Mercury* wrote to the printer that “Julius Ceasar, Oliver Cromwell, and the nobles of Venice, were natives and inhabitants of the countries whose power they usurped and drenched in blood.”<sup>373</sup> In questioning early republic diplomacy, a reader of the *Providence Journal* recounted how France had decided to send an ambassador to Oliver Cromwell not to recognize his authority, but for their own best interests in maintaining channels of information and communication.<sup>374</sup> In 1793, a reader of the *Herald of the United States*, published in Warren, Rhode Island, submitted to the printer the speech made by Christopher Love, a minister executed by Cromwell, predicting the speedy demise of Cromwell’s government—suggesting a parallel to the new United States.<sup>375</sup> Cromwell was not only an embarrassment for England’s past, but New England’s, too. In 1797, the *Mercury* reprinted proceedings of the House of Representatives that contained an interesting exchange. Matthew Lyon of Vermont taunted John Allen of Connecticut for making “such a noise about” his puritan blood and ancestry; Lyon pointedly apologized that “he could not trace among his progenitors any of the courtiers of Oliver Cromwell, nor of those who hanged witches,” calling to mind for these two New England men not only Cromwell’s personal

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<sup>372</sup> *Providence Gazette*, May 28, 1763, p. 1.

<sup>373</sup> *Newport Mercury*, March 17, 1788, p. 1.

<sup>374</sup> *Providence Journal and Town and Country Advertiser*, November 20, 1799, p. 3.

<sup>375</sup> *Herald of the United States* (Warren, RI), March 23, 1793, p. 4.

connections to elite New England puritans, but also what was then (and now) widely considered New England's most embarrassing historical incident.<sup>376</sup> Debates surrounding the United States Constitution in Rhode Island—the last state to ratify in 1790—also likely influenced a 1788 reprinting in the *Newport Herald* of Cromwell's speech delivered before purging the Long Parliament in 1648.<sup>377</sup>

Cromwell developed a somewhat more favorable reputation for some after the Revolution, such as in prints of favorable anecdotes of his bravery, cunning, and ability to sniff out corruption himself. In 1796, the *Providence Gazette* published the following anecdote:

OLIVER CROMWELL, while carrying on a war in Scotland, was riding near Glasgow at the head of a body of horse. A Scotch soldier, planted on a high wall, took the opportunity to fire at him, but missed him. —Oliver, without slackening or drawing his rein, turned round and said, “Fellow, if any trooper of mine had missed such a mark, he should have had an hundred lashes.” He did not even order the man to be seized, and he made his escape. A rare example of true courage!<sup>378</sup>

In another anecdote intended to highlight his cunning, Cromwell was allowed to pass through the king's army shortly before the battle of Edgehill by disguising himself as rustic farmer who was not aware of the war.<sup>379</sup> Importantly, in both anecdotes, Cromwell is not praised for his character, merely for his cunning and prowess.

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<sup>376</sup> *Newport Mercury*, June 13, 1797, p. 2.

<sup>377</sup> *Newport Herald*, April 10, 1788, p. 4.

<sup>378</sup> *Providence Gazette*, April 16, 1796, p. 4.

<sup>379</sup> *Providence Gazette*, November 28, 1789, p. 4.

With so many of the above references coming from Rhode Island readers' letters to the printers, rather than reprints from elsewhere, it is worth interrogating how Rhode Island religious demographics may have played a role. With the prominence of the Anglican church in Rhode Island at this time, many of them were likely penned by Anglicans—no doubt the condemnation of Thomas Mayhew. But with significant populations of Congregationalist, Quaker, Baptist, and Jewish Rhode Islanders, it is curious that we do not see them coming to Cromwell's defense. Jewish Rhode Islanders may have felt ambivalent about Cromwell. Although the popular narrative continues to purport that Cromwell welcomed Jews to return to England during the Commonwealth, the Whitehall conference on Jewish readmission came to no definitive decisions. Historian Eliane Glasser argues that this was initiated by Jewish people themselves when a Jewish population already existed in London before the conference. In other words, she argues that Cromwell did very little except decline to stand in their way.<sup>380</sup>

With Rhode Island's own history so contentious—a tug of war between a narrative of the colony as a safe haven of religious liberty and one of religious conflict that fell short of the colony's ideal—it follows that Rhode Islanders would treat supposed a liberator with skepticism. On the one hand, that Rhode Island departed from the rest of New England in continuing to condemn Cromwell through the Revolutionary era lends support to a narrative of Rhode Island exceptionalism. Yet it was only exceptional to New England, closely resembling the uniform condemnation of Cromwell in other colonies. In this way, Rhode Island's late eighteenth-century Anglican elite had more in common with

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<sup>380</sup> Eliane Glasser, "Commemorating a Myth," *History Today*, No. 56, Vol. 3 (March 2006), p. 45-47. See also, Andrew Crome, "English National Identity and the Readmission of the Jews, 1650-1656," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (April 2015), p. 280-301.

the Anglican elite of what had once been cavalier territory than they did with the roundheads of their past. But even for the Rhode Islanders with no such stakes, the roundheads of their past had let them down, and a new nation could let them down.

More recent figures also resonated with Revolutionary Rhode Islanders. In 1774, four years after George Whitefield's death, the *Providence Gazette* published an anecdote of a prediction he made. "Persecution would have its reign" in America, he foretold. A friend asked how that could be, when "the Protestant churches are too much enlightened, and have seen too many of the good effects of toleration, ever to persecute one another anymore." Whitefield answered that Christ could never redeem America because there were "no MARTYRS there to seal with their blood the truth of his religion."<sup>381</sup> "Persecution" here is framed as the lack of true religion, rather than the opposite of toleration, demonstrating that Rhode Island attitudes had changed significantly since the publication of *Mr. Samuel Gorton's Ghost* forty-six years prior.

Rhode Islanders also drew from more ancient pasts, especially in highlighting the exhaustion of constant infighting. A reader of the *Gazette* submitted an essay in 1772 lamenting the infighting and factionalism of the day. The cure? "First, inform yourself of the *Roman Laws*, till the time of *Theodosius*; you will not meet with a single Edict to torture, crucify, or break upon the Wheel, those who are accused only of thinking differently from yourself." Next, "collect the passages of *Cicero*." Then it will become clear that "mutual Toleration is the only Remedy against the Errors that pervert the Minds of Men." The essay then goes on to compare humanity to a ship. Of the passengers, "one is a *Nestorian*; that a *Jew*; there is one who believes in an Inhabitant of *Picardy*; the other

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<sup>381</sup> *Providence Gazette*, December 17, 1774, p. 1.

is a Native of *Isleba*; here is an *Ignicole Family*; those are *Musselmans*... But what signifies their Sect? They should all labour to calk the Ship; as each, by securing his Neighbour's Life for a few Moments, also secures his own; but they all quarrel, and they all perish."<sup>382</sup> Two decades later, the *Gazette* published an essay on Tamerlane and his conquest of Bulgaria in the fourteenth century that suited the concerns of their time. He met two factions of priests, one which shaved their beards and prayed facing to the right during the full moon, the other which shaved their heads and prayed facing to the left at the new moon. Tamerlane told them, "Let each party retire, and worship the Almighty in the manner most satisfactory to their own consciences; but at the same time be it know, that I forbid, on pain of death, the votaries of one form to offer the smallest molestation to the advocates for the other." Both sides did then pray--for God to punish Tamerlane, and the other sect.<sup>383</sup> The ironic ending of this anecdote echoed early republic concerns about toleration potentially breeding intolerance by allowing extreme sects to thrive. Another 1790s entry takes an iconoclastic aim at the patron saint of England—St. George, described as a "parasite," a fraud, a "barbarian conqueror," and worst of all, failed to protect the religious liberty of the people under his reign.<sup>384</sup> Like Cromwell or Williams, St. George served as an example of a figure revered as a hero who was a wolf in sheep's clothing and did not deliver on his promises.

The overwhelming impression one gets of Rhode Islanders' impression of history is one of disillusionment and caution. While that cynicism ran in both patriot and loyalist circles, we turn now to how cynicism specifically influenced loyalist perspectives.

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<sup>382</sup> *Providence Gazette*, May 23, 1772, p. 1.

<sup>383</sup> *Providence Gazette*, November 17, 1792, p. 4.

<sup>384</sup> *Newport Herald*, September 23, 1790, p. 1.

## Rhode Island Loyalist Cynicism

Similar to how John Cotton accused Roger Williams of unreasonably and unfairly portraying himself as a victim of an intolerant government, and similar to how Roger Williams accused Quakers of fanaticism that shunned rational, dispassionate debate, loyalists in Rhode Island painted patriots as hypocrites who exaggerated their victimization and held incoherent positions that withered under the gentlest of probing. This section examines two sources of loyalist voices, the loyalist paper the *Newport Gazette* and the diary of Newport loyalist exile Thomas Vernon. While the former mainly channeled the rhetoric of Cotton and the latter channeled Williams against the Quakers, both sources exhibited a cynicism with patriot claims to overcoming oppression and championing the oppressed, especially along religious lines.

For loyalist printer John Howe, the appeals to religious liberty by patriots were nauseating and frivolous at best, disingenuous and hypocritical at worst. Historian Ralph Brown broke down Howe's rhetorical methods into three categories: 1) to highlight "that the people [were] growing weary of the war," 2) convince his readers of the impossibility of rebel victory, and 3) to portray patriot leaders as "inefficient and selfish."<sup>385</sup> I contend that Howe's religious attacks fell primarily into Brown's third category as they attacked patriot's motivations. Brown also noted that Howe did not include as many "bitter attacks on France" that "appeal[ed] to religious bigotry" as other loyalist papers, especially in New York and Philadelphia, did.<sup>386</sup> Let us take Brown's keen observation a step further

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<sup>385</sup> Ralph Brown, "The Newport Gazette, Tory Newsheet," *Rhode Island History* 14 (1955): 11, cited in George Edward Cullen Jr., "Talking to a Whirlwind: the Loyalist Printers in America, 1763-1783," Dissertation, West Virginia University, 1979, p. 292. Brown's piece on the *Gazette* appeared in two separate parts in *Rhode Island History*, with the above cited being the second.

<sup>386</sup> This appears in the first part of "The Newport Gazette, Tory Newsheet," *Rhode Island History* 13 (1954): 100, cited in Cullen, p. 300.

and ask why Howe chose not to engage in anti-Catholicism when, as I argue later in this chapter, anti-Catholicism was very popular with Rhode Islanders on both sides of the conflict. But avoiding open religious bigotry and focusing more energy instead on exposing the hypocrisy of patriots' appeals to religious liberty allowed Howe to position loyalists as the true side of religious liberty and patriots as frauds.

Born to Sandemanian converts in Boston, Howe knew the treatment that religious minorities in New England could expect first-hand.<sup>387</sup> Howe was first apprenticed to Richard Draper, Royal printer in Massachusetts who printed the *Massachusetts Gazette*, until being offered the office of Printer for the Provincial Forces in 1776. After the successful English occupation of Newport, Howe and his fiancée relocated there, printing the first issue of the *Newport Gazette* in January of 1777, which ran until 1779, when British troops and loyalists were evacuated to New York.<sup>388</sup>

Though not a lifelong Rhode Islander, Howe seemed keen to the interests and sensibilities of a Rhode Island audience without necessarily calling direct attention to

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<sup>387</sup> Sandemanians tended to be loyalists, but, like Quakers, were also pacifists. Jean F. Hankins argues that Sandemanian loyalists pacificism was so entrenched that they would not even publish "pro-British propaganda" ("A Different Kind of Loyalist: The Sandemanians of New England during the Revolutionary War," *The New England Quarterly* 60, No. 2 (Jun., 1987): 223). Howe's paper does not necessarily challenge Hankins' argument because it is unclear how strongly Howe identified with Sandemanianism while in Newport; he and his fiancée were married in an Anglican ceremony shortly after arriving (Cullen, p. 289). For more on Sandemanian loyalism, see chapter five of JH Smith, *The Perfect Rule of the Christian Religion: A History of Sandemanianism in the Eighteenth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), pp. 121-152.

<sup>388</sup> Late eighteenth-century Rhode Island saw a handful of short-lived papers with runs of fewer than five years, including Providence's *American Journal and General Advertiser* from 1779 to 1781, the *Gazette Francoise* from 1780 to 1781 to serve French troops in Newport, and the *Newport Herald* from 1787 to 1791. Although I primarily consulted Readex's America's Historical Newspapers database for this dissertation, I checked these dates against outside sources such as the American Antiquarian Society's Clarence database, taking into consideration that the Readex database does not always contain the entire runs. America's Historical Newspapers only contains the 1777 issues of the *Newport Gazette*, but Timothy M. Barne's bibliography of loyalist papers lists the dates of the full run of the *Gazette* as January 16, 1777 to October 6, 1779 (*Loyalist Newspapers of the American Revolution 1763-1783: A Bibliography*, Worcester, MA: Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society, 1974, Vol. 83:2, p. 233). Only the 1777 issues available through Readex were consulted for this dissertation. I consulted Cullen's dissertation, cited in footnote 57, for highlights from the 1778 and 1779 issues.



them. Two significant Rhode Island intellectual traditions are represented in his paper: First, its commitment to preserving order and resisting faction, and second, its wariness of promises of liberty by a new government. Howe dedicated a significant amount of his content to urging against incivility in general. He never printed anything promoting the oppression of colonists or dissenting religious groups; instead, through reprints and selected readers' letters, he painted a portrait of patriots as fools who did not understand their hypocrisy or devils who did not care about being hypocrites so long as they satisfied their own selfish interests.

Howe frequently reprinted material supporting this image. The *Gazette* included this humorous and apocryphal account of where Americans were getting their men from. "A young fellow, named Dawkins, who was some time since tried at Chelmsford Assize, and transported for stealing cheese, &c. Has, we hear just sent a letter to his mother informing her the American Congress have presented him with a captain's commission." Though ridiculous enough, it goes on to say that he and other rebels who were "banished for their firm attachment to the cause of *Liberty*, now rank high in the American army."<sup>389</sup> This served to reinforce the rhetorical method of dodging the merits of patriot's complaints entirely and simply calling them opportunistic hypocrites and criminals. An essay written for the *Gazette*, not reprinted for another paper, expressed the sentiment that the war could be over very quickly because of the low character and ability of rebel forces.<sup>390</sup>

Sometimes, the tone was more sincere. Howe printed an address of Church of England clergy assembled in NY to Viscount Howe. "We lamented the infatuation of our

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<sup>389</sup> *Newport Gazette*, October 30, 1777, p. 1.

<sup>390</sup> March 20, 1777.

Fellow Subjects which led them, contrary to their Duty and Interest, to adopt such Principles and Measures as We were convinced would be subversive of our happy Constitution in Church and State.” They lamented the miseries of those fellow Britons “who were endeared to us by every social and religious Tie!” and mourned the loss of “that Freedom and Security, both Religious and Civil, which are the envied Portion of British Subjects.”<sup>391</sup> In this case, the address portrayed the patriots as sincerely misguided and worthy of pity, not necessarily dishonest thieves.

While reprints from around the British Atlantic helped set the tone of the paper, submissions from Rhode Islanders themselves highlight Howe’s keen understanding of his audience. A letter to the printer published in February of 1777 captured both Rhode Islanders’ abhorrence of faction as well as the hypocrisy of patriots. The author addressed his “deluded fellow countrymen.” He urged them to “return to their former civilized Situation,” an admonishment of partisanship writ large. He then took them to task on having a monopoly on the idea of preserving their rights, as “Tyrants and Oppression are as much detested by Britons, as they ever were.” And finally, he accused that patriots “have pretended an Attachment to the Cause of Liberty, whilst, by Arts that would shame a Jesuit, they have beguiled you of the Liberty of beholding both Sides of the Controversy.”<sup>392</sup> Another address called out the “Malice of their Conduct under a pretended Regard for Religion”.<sup>393</sup> In other words, patriots, claiming to be champions of liberty, were themselves oppressive by silencing their critics. A poem submitted by a reader decried faction: “Of Zeal’s delusion, fann’d by Faction’s breath, /Protens, in all his

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<sup>391</sup> *Newport Gazette*, April 10, 1777, p. 4.

<sup>392</sup> *Newport Gazette*, February 6, 1777, p. 2.

<sup>393</sup> *Newport Gazette*, July 24, 1777, p. 4.

mystic shapes, falls short, /A confidence in sin, when mix'd with zeal, /Seems innocent, and looks to most as well.”<sup>394</sup> A reader-submitted letter signed “G.A.” began with a similar quote from “Otway,” read: “Avoid the public, the factious Fool,/ The busy, buzzing, talking, harden'd Knave;/ The quaint smooth Rogue, that sins against his Reason,/ Calls saucy loud Sedition public Zeal,/ And Mutiny the Dictates of his Spirit.” It goes on to outline his views of “Civil Liberty,” a concept baked into Rhode Islanders’ understanding of the world.<sup>395</sup>

Howe also included some material from a patriot perspective, sometimes with commentary. In June of 1777, he reprinted an extract from a Providence paper, an address “from the inhabitants of Philadelphia” to the Pennsylvania Council of Safety, regarding the case of James Pemberton, a Quaker who refused to take up arms for the patriot cause. The address assured that they “hold the pure directive of universal LIBERTY of CONSCIENCE, and conceive it our duty to endeavor to secure that sacred right to others, as well as to defend it for ourselves.” It concluded with a plea for Pemberton’s judges to disregard “his connections, interest, riches, poverty, or principles of religion, and to attend to the nature of his office only.” Howe prefaced the address with this commentary: “Our Readers will easily perceive, that the pretended Regard to the Rights of Conscience, so frequently mentioned in it, is only to sanctify the Barbarity of the concluding Advice.”<sup>396</sup> Asking the judges to abandon their religious principles nullified their calls for religious liberty.

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<sup>394</sup> *Newport Gazette*, April 3, 1777, p. 4.

<sup>395</sup> *Newport Gazette*, April 10, 1777, p. 1.

<sup>396</sup> *Newport Gazette*, June 26, 1777, p. 2.

This highlights a key disagreement that developed in the late eighteenth century over the definition of religious liberty: did it mean protecting the state from religion, or religion from the state? Clearly, Howe--and presumably many of his readers--felt that asking someone to abandon their religious conscience in order to conduct civil business was a form of religious oppression. If Howe was correct about the opinions of his most of his loyalist readership in Newport, that necessarily implies a particular interpretation of Rhode Island's approach to religious liberty, that Rhode Island existed to protect conscience from the state, and not necessarily the other way around. Through his selection of reprinted material and the letters he published, Howe cultivated a tone that was defiant, sarcastic, and jaded. Even though the British occupied Newport for the entire run of the paper, the paper would have you imagine loyalist Rhode Islanders currently cornered and ostracized.

Howe was far from alone in his misgivings about religious toleration. A reader of the Providence paper, the *United States Chronicle*, cautioned that toleration produced such doubt, due to the abundance of choices, that it intimidated those who would otherwise be pious.<sup>397</sup> A *Providence Gazette* reader wrote to the printer to publish an extract "from a late European Publication" which warned of the dangers of the erosion of the distinction between right and wrong. "The most serious offences are often named with cool indifference; the most shameful profligacy, with affected tenderness and indulgent toleration."<sup>398</sup> A reprint from the *Norwich Weekly Register* in the *Newport Mercury* complained that true religion is persecuted "under the specious garb of universal toleration," in the same vein as the previously discussed formulation of religious liberty

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<sup>397</sup> *United States Chronicle* (Providence), September 19, 1793, p. 1.

<sup>398</sup> *Providence Gazette*, April 11, 1789, p. 1.

as needing to protect church from government, not government from church.<sup>399</sup> By calling the justification of universal toleration as “specious garb,” this framing evaded direct discussion of the merits of universal toleration. A reprint from the *Connecticut Courant* in the *Providence Gazette* was even more forthcoming: “Mr. Jefferson’s murderers, atheists, &c. have nothing further to do, then, than to spread their doctrines, until a majority of the community shall become proselytes to the faith, and then the laws against the practice of murder, rape, robbery, &c. will be repealed.”<sup>400</sup> One could see the two extracts from Connecticut papers published in Rhode Island as nothing more than keeping readers informed of the opinions of their neighbors. However, read alongside evidence that Rhode Island readers of these papers expressed similar opinions, they give more of the impression of endorsement. They perceived Jefferson and others as pushing something much more extreme than just separation of church and state. After all, Rhode Island, even established with only a “civil” government, still outlawed murder, rape, robbery, sodomy, witchcraft, in part because the first three constituted humanistic threats to life, safety, and property, but also in part due to a Protestant consensus that transcended the need for an official church. Rhode Island’s founders never wanted a government entirely free from religion, and many Revolutionary Rhode Islanders did not want such a situation, either.

Although the *Newport Gazette* may have run during British occupation and an ideal time to be a loyalist in the city, the previous year saw intense targeting of prominent Newport loyalists. Rhode Island loyalists had not always been safe to be outspoken in

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<sup>399</sup> *Newport Mercury*, April 21, 1795, p. 1.

<sup>400</sup> *Providence Gazette*, July 19, 1800, p. 1.

their loyalism. In June of 1776, the General Assembly passed the Test Act, in which any member of the General Assembly could summon someone they suspected of loyalism and demand that they sign a declaration of support for the North American colonies in rebellion with Great Britain. At least sixty-four individuals were summoned and ordered to sign the declaration.<sup>401</sup> For those who refused, the Assembly member who summoned them had the right to ask why. If the reason given was unsatisfactory, the Assembly could issue a warrant for the Sheriff to search their home for arms and seize them. This is the extent of the original Act passed in June; included no instructions for punishment beyond seizing of any arms found in the home. Another Act passed in July added fines as punishment for refusal to sign the declaration and failure to provide a satisfactory answer. Religion counted as a satisfactory answer; the Assembly stated that Quakers who considered loyalism to be in line with their pacifist theology were protected from the Test Act under the same act that exempted them from military service.<sup>402</sup>

Neither incarceration nor removal were codified into law, but that was how the General Assembly carried out the law. Almost immediately after the passage of the Act in June, sheriffs forcibly removed approximately twenty people who refused to take the oath from their homes, mostly from Newport, and forced them to live elsewhere. In August, the Assembly passed an act requiring those exiled to pay their living expenses while banished. In October, the Assembly passed an Act that those banished could return if they paid fines and reimbursed their living expenses during their exile.

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<sup>401</sup> Thomas N. Ingersoll, *The Loyalist Problem in Revolutionary New England* (Cambridge, 2016), p. 196.

<sup>402</sup> *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, Vol. VII (Providence: A. C. Greene and Brothers, 1856), p. 568. The religious exemption for military service was repealed in 1777. See chapter 2 of this dissertation for a complete account of religious exemptions for military service during the colonial period in Rhode Island and the 1777 repeal. How the repeal of the religious exemption for military service would have affected Quakers subject to the Test Act is unknown as the Test Act was no longer enforced during British occupation in 1777.

The most complete primary source we have of the experiences of those banished by the Test Act is the diary of Thomas Vernon.<sup>403</sup> Born in 1718, Vernon was fifty-eight years old when the sheriff escorted him and three other men—John Nicoll, Nicholas Lechmere, and Richard Beale—from Newport to the home of a Baptist farming family in rural Gloucester.<sup>404</sup> Vernon had been the postmaster for Newport for thirty years, weathered the Stamp Act crisis, and was responsible for Newport subscribers to the *Boston Chronicle*, a loyalist paper. He had also served as the register of the Court of Admiralty, and therefore had significant familiarity with the law, and as the secretary of the Redwood Library. At the time of his banishment, he was the senior warden at Trinity Church in Newport.

Vernon and his three companions boarded with Stephen Keach (or Keetch), his wife (whose first name does not appear in the diary) and their children, three sons and two daughters, with one adult daughter who occasionally visited. Two hired men and one hired boy also resided in the home. Keach's brother and his wife—"poor, with many children"<sup>405</sup>—lived nearby; the exiles paid this Mrs. Keach to launder their linens. According to Vernon, these men primarily lived off supplies from their families in Newport delivered by friendly couriers. They also occasionally paid their hosts for food and drink or to obtain supplies from nearby Providence, rarely borrowing any or receiving any from the Keaches for free, which they made sure to tell the Assembly when it demanded reimbursement for the cost of their upkeep. They also grew their own

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<sup>403</sup> *The Diary of Thomas Vernon, A Loyalist, Banished from Newport by the Rhode Island General Assembly in 1776* (Providence: Sidney S. Rider, 1881).

<sup>404</sup> Walter Chaloner, from the opening anecdote of the introduction to this dissertation, was also ordered removed to Gloucester at the same time as these men, but never joined them (*Diary*, p. 2). He escaped Newport in a specially made craft something like a present-day kayak, with a seat attached to a basic wooden plank. See Christian M. McBurney, *Spies in Revolutionary Rhode Island* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2014).

<sup>405</sup> *Diary*, p. 50.

vegetables and occasionally hunted and fished. Although they sometimes visited with members of the family during the day, the men slept and ate in a separate room that they shared, rarely dining with the rest of the household. Breakfast was usually coffee, tea, or chocolate. The midday meal of dinner consisted of whatever meat their family or friends supplied them along with their vegetables. If their supply packages contained rum and limes, they enjoyed an afternoon punch. The evening meal of supper was almost always milk and bread.

Vernon went to great lengths to portray the four of them, and especially himself, as industrious, calm, and reasonable in the face of their absurd situation. He diligently noted when he rose in the morning, almost always before six, and when they retired in the evening, almost always before ten. Vernon claimed that he usually rose first, occupying himself with a book before the others were awake for breakfast. When they were not preoccupied with their garden, hunting and fishing, assisting with household chores, or reading, they occupied themselves with walks, card games, and naps. On Sundays, they washed and shaved.

Religious tensions between the Anglican Newporter and the rural, presumably Six-Principle Baptist family color the diary.<sup>406</sup> Vernon's commentary implied that the religion of his host family was shallow and facetious. "The religion of the people of this town consists entirely of New Light Baptists," Vernon noted. "The custom of Dipping is much in vogue in this and the neighboring towns."<sup>407</sup> On Friday, July 12th, Mr. and Mrs. Keach travelled to Connecticut to attend baptisms. Vernon diligently recorded who

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<sup>406</sup> That the family was rural, and Baptist, is explicit throughout the diary. That they were Six-Principle is never explicitly stated, but is a reasonable assumption.

<sup>407</sup> *Diary*, p. 25-26.



attended meetings on Sundays. Mr. Keach went, alone, on July 7th. On July 14th, he and one of the hired men went. On July 21st, most of the family went. On August 1st, a Thursday, Vernon commented that John Nicoll, one of his three companions, attended a meeting at the home of an Elder, but as he was the only one who showed up, the Elder prayed with him briefly and dismissed him. Vernon then commented that self-styled “Elders” were “innumerable.”<sup>408</sup> One “Elder Williams” visited the home but “was sulky and did not choose to speak to us.”<sup>409</sup> That Sunday, August 4th, Vernon read the Anglican service to his companions while some family members went to meeting. The next Sunday, August 11th, Vernon commented that only one of the hired men went to meeting despite the family’s “great pretention to religion.”<sup>410</sup> On August 18th, only one of the hired men went. Two of the girls and one of the boys went on August 25th, for the first time since their arrival. Two of the girls also went on September 1st.

Vernon also used a reservedly bitter tone for political discussions. On June 26th, a few days after their arrival, he wrote, “Our landlord inclined much to talk of liberty and the times. We endeavored to waive the conversation. It is amazing what false and erroneous opinions and ideas these people have entertained, and what is worse, it is impossible for the human mind to undeceive them, such is their prejudice.” He remarked that they were in “good nature and spirits” when they retired to bed, framing themselves as cool and civil in the face of their opponents irrational partisanship.<sup>411</sup> On August 3rd, he wrote about an elderly neighbor who “walks to our house (though very poorly) almost

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<sup>408</sup> *Diary*, p. 46.

<sup>409</sup> *Diary*, p. 56. This Elder Williams, from Foster, RI, only seven miles from Glocester, is referenced in Daniel P. Jones, *The Economic and Social Transformation of Rural Rhode Island, 1780-1850* (Northeastern, 1992) as having “irregular conduct” that supposedly drove congregants to deism (p. 137).

<sup>410</sup> *Diary*, p. 60.

<sup>411</sup> *Diary*, p. 9.

every day, and sometimes twice a day, in order to read the Providence newspaper and paraphrase upon it.” His mind was “much poisoned with the disorder of the country.” Vernon sarcastically remarked that “he is a very great Politician.”<sup>412</sup> Vernon only remarked on his visits and commentary on the newspaper in one other entry, on August 11<sup>th</sup>, but knowing that he visited daily gives the reader the impression that the neighbor’s visits slowly wore down Vernon’s patience.

Vernon stuck to the framing of himself and the exiles as simply civil and reasonable men, and the patriots as foolish zealots, in chronicling the hostilities that they faced. On July 7<sup>th</sup>, a group of roughly twenty men and women on horseback arrived asking questions about their stay. The exiles politely invited them into their room. One came in but said nothing. They left once they had “satisfied [their] curiosity staring at the Tories.”<sup>413</sup> Two days later, a weathervane that they built in their leisure time was stolen. The staff that held the vane was stolen four days later. The next day, one of the hired men informed them that one of the town’s Elders constructed a Liberty Pole out of their vane and staff. Toward the end of July, Mr. Keach informed them that many people in town were uneasy at their presence in the town. In early August, word reached them that some members in town threatened to destroy the house for keeping Tories. Thirty or forty men were ready to “carry off those Newport people.”<sup>414</sup> Vernon and his companions asked a weaver to make them handkerchiefs, but she “feared that if the people of the town knew it, the consequences might be injurious to her and her family.”<sup>415</sup> The men appealed to be

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<sup>412</sup> *Diary*, p. 47-48.

<sup>413</sup> *Diary*, p. 22.

<sup>414</sup> *Diary*, p. 64.

<sup>415</sup> *Diary*, p. 65.

removed to another town, or at the very least, to another home in Gloucester, making a show of playing by the rules in a system they saw as illegitimate.

Relations with the family deteriorated. Vernon noted “a very great coolness and indifferency towards us” as negative attitudes toward the loyalist exiles escalated in Gloucester.<sup>416</sup> This was exacerbated by the Keach’s situation. Not only did the family lack the resources to feed the exiles staying with them, but by mid-August, struggled to feed themselves, and skimmed off the top of supplies that arrived for the exiles without their permission. “It seems they can digest Tories’ victuals very well, though they pretend that they can’t their company nor conversation.”<sup>417</sup> These tensions came to a head in late August when Mr. Keach informed them that they would have to pay for their room and board. Vernon and the others responded that not only was it extralegal for the Assembly to retroactively enforce this—similar to the controversy of back taxes for Baptists in Ashfield, Massachusetts—but “besides, that we had not had provisions provided since we had been at his house which were fitting and proper for us, and that if we had not received frequently supplies from Newport we should have well nigh starved. [Keach] being conscious of the truth of this assertion made us no reply, but went out of the room.”<sup>418</sup> After that, Mrs. Keach brought them extra food and milk. Conscious that every effort was being made by the Keaches, the exiled men, and the Assembly to find another situation for them, “the family are determined that we shall part good friends, which is our hearty wish, having done everything to promote a good harmony in our power.”<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> *Diary*, p. 83.

<sup>417</sup> *Diary*, p. 68.

<sup>418</sup> *Diary*, p. 80-81.

<sup>419</sup> *Diary*, p. 89.

On September 7th, the men finally departed the Keaches for the home of Richard Greene, a fellow loyalist, who gave them “a hearty and kind welcome” and provided them with “dry clothing and every other refreshment we could wish or desire.”<sup>420</sup> The next night, “a party had come in pursuit of us,” about a dozen armed people, including Jacob Greene, the elder brother of General Nathanael Greene, and Stephen Mumford, a member of the Committee of Safety, who were let into their bedroom.<sup>421</sup> “They told us that they were informed that we had broke the laws of the General Assembly by departing the town of Gloucester without leave of the authorities.”<sup>422</sup> They explained that they left with the intention to turn themselves in to the Newport sheriff for commitment rather than wait for a decision at the Keach’s. The armed party agreed to meet them in East Greenwich the next morning “to confer further on the subject. With this arrangement we pledged our words of honor that we would comply, and they took their leave of us.”<sup>423</sup> The next morning, at a tavern, the exiles pleaded to go to Newport and “offered to give any security they desired” and deliver themselves into custody. “Finally they concluded to send an express to Providence, with a letter to Governor Cooke, asking his orders respecting us, since we would not agree upon an explanation of the Act of Assembly. They were so obliging as to consent that we should write a letter to the Governor, which we did. (But these gentlemen were not so kind as to let us know by what authority they exercised this power over us.)”<sup>424</sup> They stayed the night at the tavern.

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<sup>420</sup> *Diary*, p. 94.

<sup>421</sup> Richard was apparently related to Nathanael and Jacob, though exactly how is unclear. “Tories—‘King’ Richard Greene and Governor Joseph Wanton,” Warwick Rhode Island Digital History Project, accessed January 2, 2023, [https://www.warwickhistory.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=273:tories-qkingq-richard-greene-and-governor-joseph-wanton&catid=56&Itemid=125](https://www.warwickhistory.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=273:tories-qkingq-richard-greene-and-governor-joseph-wanton&catid=56&Itemid=125)

<sup>422</sup> *Diary*, p. 95-96.

<sup>423</sup> *Diary*, p. 97.

<sup>424</sup> *Diary*, p. 97-98.

Governor Cooke gave a verbal directive via Major Preserved Peirce that the men “must be ordered to Providence (by whom) Gaol [jail] forthwith agreeably to an act of Assembly. An act of which we never before had knowledge.”<sup>425</sup> Again we see a deflection about the precise disagreements between patriots and tories by pointing out that their authority, like their religion, was facetious, pretentious, and could not withstand even the softest questioning of legitimacy. Nevertheless, they travelled to Providence and committed themselves to the Gaol. It was crowded, with no beds or bedding, and “many other shocking circumstances too tedious to mention. We questioned our guards... with respect to their power of taking us into custody, and committing us. They acknowledged they had no legal process from any magistrate to take us into custody, nor for our commitment, saving a copy of an Act of Assembly, passed at the session in July 1776. We made ourselves as easy as possible in this shocking situation.”<sup>426</sup>

By tediously following instructions to the letter of the law to the extent that was possible, up until the point that they were ready to turn themselves into custody for their own safety, these men intended to mock the chaotic legal situation of declared independence and the patriot cause. From their vantage point, they were playing along with a childish game devised by incompetent zealots, but because they diligently played along, they were entirely faultless. From Vernon’s perspective, the rural Baptists who confined them, stole from them, and eventually drove them out of town with threats of violence were cowards and pretenders. This sidestepped any need to debate the merits of Independence; such a debate was moot in the face of patriot’s aggressive and lawless behavior.

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<sup>425</sup> *Diary*, p. 99.

<sup>426</sup> *Diary*, p. 101.

## The Versatility of Anti-Catholicism

In 1779, New York loyalist printer James Rivington printed a “Declaration and Address of His Majesty’s Loyal Associated Refugees, Assembled at Newport, Rhode-Island.” The address begins with a distain for “the promoters of faction.” While this was common in loyalist literature, this general condemnation of “faction” carried particular weight in Rhode Island, where rival political factions eroded trust in colonial government in the second half of the eighteenth century and where discussions about feuding religious and political groups had their roots in Williams’ and other early Rhode Island colonists’ disapproval of groups who were too partisan, zealous, and disorderly. The address likens patriots to tyrants and despots, a common thread in Rhode Island discussions of religious dissenters. It goes on to express the loyalists’ reluctance to “take up arms against our own countrymen,” by which they meant fellow colonists, their intentions grounded instead in “loyalty, public virtue, and disinterested patriotism.” “We execrate the men and measures in whatever part of the world they are, who countenancing and conspiring with the leaders of faction and discontent in America, have contributed towards bringing national discord to the present ruinous and fatal extreme.” This careful hedging deflected accusations that they were the disruptive partisans. But more than simply framing political faction as nebulously bad, the Declaration spends several pages recounting very real discrimination, danger, and violence that Loyalists faced. The Declaration also laments the rebels’ recruitment of Indian allies for their cause, breaking the alliances with the colony and the crown forged over the colonial period. It also laments the arming and radicalizing of enslaved people. As was common among white loyalists and patriots across English America, they fear of being “enslaved”

themselves in the same breath. Then religion comes in. The patriots preferred “an alliance with the Roman Catholic nation of France, who are, and, as the Congress themselves have acknowledged, ‘must be opposed to Americans by civil as well as religious prejudices.’” While a great deal of the concern is couched as purely political and economic, both loyalist and patriot Rhode Islanders invoked anti-Catholicism in service to their cause.

In Rhode Island, as in the rest of New England and the rest of English colonial America, anti-Catholicism functioned as a reliable mainstream consensus, which hinged on the idea that Catholicism posed an inherent threat to a free and enlightened people. The Declaration goes on to say that allying with Catholic France made them vulnerable to the “dark and dangerous designs against the civil and religious freedom of America.” Again, as quite common in New England anti-Catholicism, prejudice against Catholics was framed as reasonable prejudice against a religion that threatened the freedoms of all other forms of Christianity; Anti-Catholicism, from this perspective, constituted an intolerance of intolerance. The direct reference to “religious freedom” could easily be read as nothing more than an expression of Rhode Island’s purportedly unique relationship to religious freedom in the eyes of most historians, but it sits more squarely in the tradition of most Protestants in colonial New England expressing this—

Massachusetts also framed Catholicism this way.<sup>427</sup>

Although the document goes to great lengths to discuss colonists’ loyalty, affinity, and similarity to other Britons, it also frames loyalty to the crown as a means of unity.

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<sup>427</sup> This framing of anti-Catholicism as a position against an inherently intolerant religion, as well as Catholic opposition to this framing, is detailed in Michael D. Briedenbach, *Our Dear-Bought Liberty: Catholics and Religious Toleration in Early America* (Harvard, 2021).

The “thirteen colonies, clashing in interest, frequently quarrelling about boundaries, and many other matters, differing in customs, religion, and forms of government,” needed the crown to provide a unifying influence. In Rhode Island, colonial government, and the crown, helped bring together otherwise disparate groups within the colony. Although they do not explicitly call attention to it, the Rhode Island loyalists may have seen the political turmoil in its own history as a warning. Independence, they contended, would lead to “cabals, factions and difference in judgment,” which Rhode Islanders would have a particular sensitivity to due to their own history of factionalism and partisanship.<sup>428</sup>

Loyalist printer John Howe reprinted an extract of a letter from Paris expressing concern over the once “extinguished” Jesuits being “at large” under Pope Pius VI, who had only ascended to the papacy two years prior. Jesuit prisoners were freed and were able to hold leadership positions in the church, causing panic throughout Europe.<sup>429</sup> The letter points out that this was contrary to the wishes of the House of Bourbon. From Howe’s fiercely loyalist perspective, the point here was not the displeasure of the House of Bourbon, which aided the enemy. Instead, the most important takeaway to a loyalist and anti-Catholic reader was that the new Pope was even more radical than the Catholic kings of Europe, out of control, and allowing dangerous partisans to run rampant throughout Europe.

Rhode Island Patriotism also invoked the threat of French Catholic influence in established English liberties, but unlike loyalists, cast the threat as not coming from collaboration with French Catholics, but the establishment of French Catholicism in

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<sup>428</sup> “Declaration and Address of His Majesty’s Loyal Associated Refugees, Assembled at Newport, Rhode Island” (New York: James Rivington, 1779).

<sup>429</sup> *Newport Gazette*, February 13, 1777, p. 1.



English colonies. Parliament had “decreed that our fellow subjects in Canada should believe that Jesus Christ turned into a white wafer,” wrote one commentator in reference to the Quebec Act with protected Catholicism in the colony.<sup>430</sup> The implication here was that Crown and Parliament threatened liberty because they tolerated a religion dangerous to liberty in their own realms. A letter printed in the *Newport Mercury* accused the parliament of having “established popery” against the wishes of the people of Quebec, who “only want the same toleration as the King’s other subjects, and the enjoyment of the same civil liberties which they always expected.” This attempts to deflect bigotry against Catholics, by claiming that having “established popery” was not even their idea.<sup>431</sup> News from the *Boston Gazette*, reprinted in the *Providence Gazette*, reiterates the same point: “the Canadians, French as well as British, are much dissatisfied” with the Quebec Act.<sup>432</sup> Both loyalists and patriots saw French Catholicism as a threat to the British empire, but for patriots, the threat was not in a friendship with France, but instead transforming the empire from within.

The distinction between dissatisfaction with colonial policy, not France or the French, made by Rhode Island patriots played a significant role in the relatively harmonious relationship between French soldiers quartered in Newport during 1780 and 1781. French soldiers understood that New Englanders’ anti-Catholicism was particularly strong, and no less so in Rhode Island, where Newport and Providence residents burned effigies of the Pope every November 5<sup>th</sup> along with the residents of Boston. Apparently conscious of Rhode Island’s religio-political culture of combatting stereotypes of disorder

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<sup>430</sup> *Providence Gazette*, January 14, 1775, p. 1.

<sup>431</sup> *Newport Mercury*, September 19, 1774, p. 2.

<sup>432</sup> *Providence Gazette*, November 19, 1774. [p. #?]

and perpetual conflict, the French were cautious, and often suggested ways to diffuse the potential for Newporters to misinterpret their intentions as an attempt to turn the colony Catholic. T. Cole Jones argues that previous interpretations of anti-Catholicism existing as a serious problem for the relationship between Newport residents and the French Army are mostly overblown. Little direct evidence exists of overt expressions of anti-Catholicism directed at the French soldiers, and far more direct evidence exists to support that relations were not merely neutral, but positive.<sup>433</sup>

As Katherine Carte argues, French support in the Revolution forced many Americans to rethink the anti-Catholicism once so central to their identity as Protestant Britons. Without the need to prove loyalty to a Protestant empire, anti-Catholicism lost some of its purpose.<sup>434</sup> Early on, subtle changes in language reveal shifting attitudes and allegiances. Rhode Island papers naturally covered the 1779 Fourth of July celebration in Philadelphia, in which French dignitaries were received at the “Roman Chapel.” Previously, most in the British empire reserved “His Most Christian Majesty” for Protestant monarchs, especially their own, and referred to the monarchs of Spain, France, and other Catholic nations as his or her “Most Catholic Majesty.” Some Americans continued to do this for other Catholic European rulers well into the early republic. But in coverage of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebrations, Louis XVI is referred to as “His Most Christian Majesty.”<sup>435</sup> Americans no longer had any good reason to portray a British Protestant monarch as more Christian than a Catholic king. *The American Journal and General Advertiser* in Providence included updates on the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots in England,

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<sup>433</sup> T. Cole Jones, “‘Displaying the Ensigns of Harmony’: The French Army in Newport, Rhode Island, 1780-1781,” *New England Quarterly* 85, No. 3 (Sept. 2012): 430-467.

<sup>434</sup> Carte, ch. 6.

<sup>435</sup> *American Journal and General Advertiser* (Providence), July 22, 1779, p. 2, also reprinted in other RI papers.

reprinting London commentary that no amount of disagreement with Catholic protections merited violence.<sup>436</sup> When the first Catholic church was established in Boston, the *United States Chronicle* commented, that because Protestant toleration had recently been established in France, Boston—and America—owed it to Boston Catholics to show the same benevolence already shown in New York and Philadelphia.<sup>437</sup> Claudius Florent, who founded the church, commented that “it must greatly enhance the character of the inhabitants of New-England in particular, who have wisely shook off that intolerent spirit which characterized their ancestors, and which led them to persecute and hang the Quakers, and are now tolerating the Roman Catholick religion, a faith so contrary to their creed, protecting it from outrage and suppression in the capital of America.”<sup>438</sup>

This was a significant turnaround from panicked warnings that a Catholic bishop could be established in America two decades earlier.<sup>439</sup> In 1786, the *Newport Mercury* praised Pope Pius VI for repealing of a decree of excommunication for Free Masons.<sup>440</sup> Of course, Rhode Island papers printed the address of American Catholics to President Washington.<sup>441</sup> In his commentary on New England, Florent clearly meant Massachusetts; the difficulties faced by early Rhode Island Quakers notwithstanding, none were hanged there. Yet Rhode Island readers encountering this commentary in the *Mercury* could take this as a pointed challenge all the same. Regardless of Rhode Island’s founding vis-à-vis that of Massachusetts, Massachusetts had a Catholic church before

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<sup>436</sup> *American Journal and General Advertiser*, August 30, 1780, p. 2; September 6, 1780, p. 2.

<sup>437</sup> *United States Chronicle* (Providence), November 20, 1788, p. 3.

<sup>438</sup> *Newport Mercury*, April 13, 1789, p. 2.

<sup>439</sup> *Providence Gazette*, June 20, 1772. For more on the bishop controversy, see Peter W. Walker, “The Bishop Controversy, the Imperial Crisis, and Religious Radicalism in New England, 1763-74,” *The New England Quarterly* 90, No. 3 (Sept. 2017): 303-343.

<sup>440</sup> *Newport Mercury*, June 5, 1786, p. 2

<sup>441</sup> *Providence Gazette*, May 1, 1790, p. 1; *Newport Mercury*, May 8, 1790, p. 1.

they did. The world in which Rhode Island was the designated safe place for the religiously persecuted in Massachusetts was history.

### **Conclusion**

We, the people of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, grateful to Almighty God for the civil and religious liberty which He hath so long permitted us to enjoy, and looking to Him for a blessing upon our endeavors to secure and to transmit the same, unimpaired, to succeeding generations, do ordain and establish this Constitution of government.

After a protracted political contest, the state of Rhode Island finally adopted a state constitution to replace its 1663 charter in 1842, much later than other states.<sup>442</sup> This preamble to the Rhode Island constitution has remained virtually unchanged since that time. The only change made to this preamble since its adoption was the removal of “and Providence Plantations” in 2020 due to its association with slavery.<sup>443</sup> Here we see the culmination of Rhode Island’s purpose in championing broad Protestantism since the seventeenth century, as well as the complete solidification of the idea that Rhode Islanders understood religious liberty as entailing the open influence of religion on government.

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<sup>442</sup> For more on the Dorr Rebellion and the adoption of the state constitution, see Erik J. Chaput, *The People’s Martyr—Thomas Wilson Dorr and His 1842 Rhode Island Rebellion* (University of Kansas, 2013).

<sup>443</sup> Some have criticized this change as New England colonies typically used the term “plantation” in contexts not as directly associated with slavery as the use of the term “plantation” in the American South. However, given that many more people were enslaved in Rhode Island than in the rest of New England, in both urban and rural settings, and given Rhode Island’s exceptionally high participation in the transatlantic slave trade compared to the rest of the region, I am of the opinion that twenty-first century Rhode Islanders’ opposition to continued use of the term “plantation” is sufficiently historically grounded.

Unlike in states like Virginia, the American Revolution did not prompt serious reckoning with issues of religious liberty in Rhode Island. It is easy for one to imagine the following counterfactual situation: had Rhode Island had an established church at the time of the Revolution, it probably would have taken at least as long as Massachusetts—that is, well into the antebellum period—to disestablish it. While created in a crucible of radicalism—though as I argue throughout the dissertation, perhaps less radical, or differently radical, than usually thought—in the seventeenth century, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century saw Rhode Island settle into a cautious, cynical conservatism rooted in the juxtaposition of its already then mythologized past and the fact that this mythologized past seemed disconnected from an unimpressive present, especially as the rest of the young nation caught up to the broad Protestant synthesis of its founding.

## Conclusion The Stonemason's Ideal

John Stevens, a stonemason, came to Newport from Boston in 1705. His shop built foundations, cellars, fireplaces, outdoor steps, cooking ranges for ships, and other common stone features of eighteenth-century life. The Stevenses also cut and inscribed gravestones for a variety of Newporters. As he got older, his son (also John) began gradually taking on more responsibility, before taking full control of the business upon his father's death in 1736. Under the younger Stevens' management, the business grew to cater to prominent building projects, and was instrumental in the building of the first and second Congregational Churches and Touro Synagogue.<sup>444</sup> Responsible for the constructions where Newporters slept, ate, worshipped, and settled into their final rest, the Stevenses occupied an intimate position in the growing city and did business with a wide array of fellow Rhode Islanders.

The third John Stevens, born 1753 and who went by "Jr." rather than "III," took in the diverse and bustling city with wonder. Once working for the business as a teenager, he began using the account book as something of a personal commonplace book, especially for poems. Interwoven with his father's and grandfather's accounting, a discernably different hand fills available space with verses and doodles, most of which archivists have dated to the late 1760s. Many of the poems and songs are copied, as usual for commonplace books of the period, but some appear to be original.<sup>445</sup> In the blank space after some accounting in February 1727/8, John Stevens, Jr. penned a poem

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<sup>444</sup> Elton W. Hall, "THE JOHN STEVENS SHOP: Three Hundred Years of Stonecutting in Newport," *The Chronicle of the Early American Industries Association, Inc.* 58, no. 4 (Dec. 2005): 141-153.

<sup>445</sup> Upon a relatively cursory search of the verses, the poem quoted below appears to be original.

praising unity above “factions and feuds.” The poem is three stanzas, the third and final reading:

Treat not a foreigner with barb’rous pride  
 Mock not his accent, or his garb deride:  
 For peace at home that people ne’er shall find,  
 Who wage a war with all mankind.<sup>446</sup>

Although Stevens, Jr. did not mention religion outright, it is easy to imagine that he felt similarly about religious differences, which sometimes, if not always, mapped onto differences in how one dressed and spoke.

Stevens penned this in the late 1760s, when the evidence I uncovered for that period, primarily from newspapers, suggested that English colonists in Rhode Island saw such appeals to tolerance as overly saccharine and old fashioned. That a private manuscript source suggests the opposite offers us the opportunity to contemplate how deeply English Protestant hegemony truly penetrated Rhode Island society. Surely not everyone living within the bounds of Rhode Island believed in Protestant hegemony, not least of all its Jewish community, its enslaved people from a multiplicity of faith backgrounds, or many of the Narragansett (their Anglican church notwithstanding)—all of whom Stevens was likely to encounter, in addition to Protestants who dressed and spoke differently from other English people, Quakers. But perhaps not as many English Protestants in Rhode Island believed in Protestant hegemony as print culture would suggest. Rhode Island founders utilized Protestant hegemony to impose order and provide justification for its liberty of conscience. As covered in chapter three, Rhode Island owed

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<sup>446</sup> Stevens Family Account Book, 1705-1798, p. 13. Mss. Folio Vols. S. American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

its late seventeenth-century survival to appeals to the metropole and broad Protestantism. Protestant hegemony colored the political alliances and maneuvers of the eighteenth century. Yet a stonemason serving the more intimate needs of the community probably had no use for it.

In arguing for how English colonists in Rhode Island maintained Protestant hegemony, this dissertation favors sources from high profile figures like Roger Williams. The few sources “from below” in this dissertation come from print culture, and are mostly anonymous. In these print sources, we mostly see reinforcement of hegemonic norms or cynicism that deflects the confrontation of those norms. Historians have generally taken from these same sources a rosy image of Rhode Island’s history of religious liberty. However, perhaps ironically, the Stevens Family Account Book gives a rosier picture than print culture or sources created by very powerful and revered men. If a utopia of religious liberty were to be found anywhere in the Rhode Island archive, this source suggests that it may ultimately be found in the voices of more ordinary people and in more obscure sources. If anyone did the real masonry work of constructing the ideal vision of a diverse and tolerant Rhode Island, it was probably people like Stevens. While the laws and well-known writings of Rhode Island—which other historians have used to point to Rhode Island as a peculiar religious safe haven—I have argued actually enforced Protestant hegemony, it is in sources such as these where we could be more likely to find the vision of Rhode Island that historians are eager to see.

This points to productive avenues of further research on Protestant hegemony in Rhode Island. True, not all manuscript sources from less well-known Rhode Islanders bore Stevens, Jr.’s appreciation for Rhode Island’s diversity. Thomas Vernon’s diary



covered in chapter five, laden with distain for rural Baptists and patriots, was, after all, a manuscript source, even if later published. It is possible that Vernon likely intended for his diary to later be read and deliberately crafted the message he wished to send to readers, even though the diary was not published until 1881. Vernon may have even intended for the diary to serve the purpose of legal accountability, given its emphasis on attempting to comply with patriot justice to the extent that was possible—though his disparaging remarks about the faith of families in Gloucester was not necessary for that purpose. In contrast, Stevens, Jr., scribbling in the pages of accounting from forty years before, likely intended that no one, not even his family members, would happen upon his writing. At the very least, Vernon’s diary demonstrates that not every unearthed diary from colonial Rhode Island will move us with tender reflections on a vibrantly diverse colony. Naturally, many individuals’ private thoughts will sincerely match prevailing hegemonic forces, as Gramsci’s framework of hegemony anticipates. But tucked away in between the pages of account books, we might find more Stevenses.

The limits of this dissertation are greater than that it favored print culture; it also favored the voices of prominent English Protestant men. There is some irony in a dissertation that seeks to interrogate longstanding myths about Rhode Island history, but dedicates two chapters nearly exclusively to Roger Williams. Granted, Protestant English men were the most invested in Protestant hegemony and the most active in enforcing it, and therefore the central argument necessitated close examination of the evidence they produced. However, further research into the lives of Rhode Islanders who were not English, not Protestant, or not men might yield more clarity as to how they engaged with Protestant hegemony and more specificity to how that hegemony operated. Although

chapter five explored how Jewish communities in the early republic interfaced with this hegemony, and chapter four gave brief mention of the Narragansett relationship to the SPG, further research could take a deeper and more consistent approach to marginalized peoples' interactions with Protestant hegemony throughout the colonial period. Doing so would likely accomplish much more than simply adding more diverse representation for the sake of it, but could fundamentally transform our understanding of the precise mechanisms of Rhode Island's Protestant hegemony. Based on the sources this dissertation did mainly employ—law, founding documents, correspondence and diaries of the more elite, print culture that captured a wide range of English Protestant voices, and to a lesser extent, some church records—it is clear that those with the most power in Rhode Island enforced Protestant hegemony, and furthermore, that many, though not all, English colonists with less prestige abided it or accommodated it. However, more research is needed to fathom Rhode Island Protestant hegemony's depths.

In the introduction, I argued that the stakes of having an established church in colonial New England were low, based on how nebulous church establishment was as a category. The ways that enforcement of Protestant hegemony changed over the course of the colonial period prompts a related question: What were the stakes of liberty of conscience? As highlighted in chapter four, by the turn of the eighteenth century, Rhode Island's liberty of conscience looked unremarkable compared to its neighbors. Yet not even the most dedicated contrarian against myths that unduly glorify Rhode Island's religious history could say the same for the seventeenth century. Although I argue in chapter three that Roger Williams' treatment of Quakers still amounted to religious intimidation that pleased fellow puritans in Massachusetts and upheld Protestant

hegemony in Rhode Island, that was still remarkable against the reality elsewhere of whippings, fines, banishment, and execution.

But it was the collapse of this difference between Rhode Island and its neighbors that prompted some eighteenth-century Rhode Islanders to look around, still see Protestant hegemony all around them, and determine that liberty of conscience not only did not radically alter that hegemony, but often supported it. Newport Congregationalist minister Ezra Stiles, taking in the various denominations in Rhode Island and New England and speaking to the future of Congregationalism in 1760, believed that Congregationalism would flourish and prevail in the following century—yet only if they contributed to “diffusive harmony,” and avoided “encroaching upon, or interfering with, the peculiarities of our protestant brethren of the other sects.”<sup>447</sup> Only in Protestant unity could the godly thrive in the face of plurality and religious apathy—the “Nothingarians”—he observed.<sup>448</sup> The stakes of not having liberty of conscience could be life and death, but having it could create Protestant association that could not exist otherwise.

Although not as transformative as we typically think it was, that is not to say it was not transformative at all. John Stevens, Jr. may have been considering the ideas of tolerance later penned in that lovely stanza around the same time that Touro Synagogue was being constructed with his family’s masonry. That construction, and that perspective, manifested even in the face of an environment that gave Moses Seixas pause before potentially offending the Protestant interests in the address to Washington, the Thomas Vernons that sneered at rural Baptists, the widespread and unanimous anti-Catholicism,

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<sup>447</sup> Ezra Stiles, *A Discourse on the Christian Union...* (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1761), p. 115.

<sup>448</sup> Winiarski, p. 497.

the accusations that Quakers who claimed religious exemption from military service were disingenuous cowards, and other religious animosities that darkened Rhode Island's skies. If the idyllic version of Rhode Island that still haunts historiography existed in any shape or form, it existed in spite of the hegemonic forces working against it.