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Roger Williams' Fight for Freedom

Today, Roger Williams is most well-known for his university and zoo namesakes. He grew up an Englishman, but came to America and made it his own. What he did in the duration of his life was truly remarkable. Most of the people who attend his namesakes do not know why they are named after him, or who he is. It is disappointing that he had such an incredible impact on democracy in America and most people have never heard of him. Roger Williams was a controversial figure; during his time many people did not favor his radical views. Later, with the enlightenment and desire for rights and freedom, people realized that he was actually a forward thinker. Despite this realization, he is not taught in most history classes and is mainly only recognized in Rhode Island. John M. Barry, a respected historian, argued in a Smithsonian article that "Williams had created the freest society in the Western world."¹ Roger Williams changed faith and freedom in America forever.

Right from the beginning, Roger Williams came to America with a curiosity and desire to not destroy what was there, but to coexist. He was one of the first men to really develop a sociable and lasting relationship with the Native Americans. He not only treated them equally, but he befriended, traded, and learned from them. Williams was the most fluent in Ojibwa language out of all the Englishmen.² While most Englishmen looked at the Native Americans like savages and possible slaves, Williams looked at them with a friendly curiosity. Growing up as a merchant tailor's son he was always by the docks with his father learning different

¹ John M. Barry, "God, Government, and Roger Williams Big Idea," last modified January 2012, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/god-government-and-roger-williams-big-idea-6291280/?no-ist>.

² Dr. Charlotte Carrington-Farmer. "Roger Williams" (Class lecture, Roger Williams University, Bristol, RI, 6th November 2014).

languages and methods of trade.³ It was that life experience that really helped him with his skill of language and negotiation. However, it was more than just an economical acquaintanceship; Williams truly respected the Native Americans and befriended them. When he ran away from the Massachusetts colony, he stayed with the Narragansett tribe and bought land from them to start his own colony. By purchasing land from them and not just taking it, he demonstrated how he sees them as equals. In addition to this, Williams also worked hard to secure the rights of the Native Americans. When he traveled to get the charter for Providence, included in it are rights for the Narragansett Indians:

And it is hereby declared, that it shall not be lawful to or for the rest of the Colonies to invade or molest the native Indians or any other inhabitants inhabiting within the bounds and limits hereafter mentioned, they having subjected themselves unto us, and being by us taken into our special protection.⁴

On top of trying to gain rights and security for Providence, he also worked hard to attain rights for the Native Americans. This kind of equality and kindness to another race is unheard of, especially when one thinks about how long it took for African Americans to achieve rights or even be seen as human beings. Roger Williams even took the time to write a dictionary for translations called, “A Key into the Language of America.” The book was very controversial since it stated how all men are created equal, which was also an extremely uncommon idea back then. Williams states in the text, “Nature knows no difference between Europe and Americans in blood, birth, bodies, &c. God having of one blood made all mankind, and all by nature being

³ Park Ranger John McNiff, “Roger Williams and Democracy” (Class guest Roger Williams University, Bristol, RI, 4th November 2014).

⁴ “THE CHARTER, GRANTED BY KING CHARLES II,” <http://livelyexperiment.org/read-the-charter/>.

children of wrath.”⁵ Even the title shows how he gives credit of the land to the Native Americans, since he says it is America’s language. His work with them is incredibly noble and ahead of his time. Williams helped pave the way for equality to come in the future, and prevented a great deal of turmoil between the Englishmen and Native Americans. From averting John Elliot to force them to practice Christianity, to stopping wars and peacekeeping, Williams always did his best to do the right thing. He believed the Native Americans should be allowed to worship how they pleased, and worked hard to make sure they got the rights they deserved.

Roger Williams instituted a new kind of faith and freedom in his colony, Providence. He wanted to create a safe environment where there was freedom of religion and no forced beliefs. Going to America his main purpose was, “to establish a ‘citty upon a hill’ dedicated to God, obeying God’s laws and flourishing in God’s image as a model for all the world to see.”⁶ Williams was determined to fulfill his vision, and Providence was his masterpiece. He did not belong in Massachusetts where they were stuck in their traditional ways. He could not institute change without putting his life in jeopardy. John Barry explained Williams’s feelings in the Smithsonian article; “A society built on the principles Massachusetts espoused would lead at best to hypocrisy, because forced worship, [Williams] wrote, ‘stinks in God’s nostrils.’”⁷ Williams made sure that his colony would be open to all religions with not one forced church or worship. Eventually, many people came to Providence as a safe haven; Jews, Protestants, and even Quakers. Williams did not particularly like the Quakers, but he tolerated them and allowed them

⁵ Roger Williams, *A Key into the Language of America: or, An help to the language of the Natives in that part of America, called New-England*. (London: Gregory Dexter, 1643), 53.

⁶ John M. Barry, “God, Government, and Roger Williams Big Idea,” last modified January 2012, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/god-government-and-roger-williams-big-idea-6291280/?no-ist>.

⁷ Ibid.

to live in his colony.⁸ Soon after establishing the colony, issues arose with land and power, so Williams went to England to get a charter for the colony, while he also got the Native Americans their rights. He worked hard to persuade the King and Parliament to allow the people of Providence the right to practice whatever religion they believed. He convinced them to do it as an experiment and after sometime, got it passed. In the charter, it even states, “they have freely declared, that it is much on their hearts (if they may be permitted) to hold forth a lively experiment, that a most flourishing civil state may stand and best be maintained.”⁹ He was determined to make a difference in his community and he succeeded. Williams did not like how his country worked or how the colonies operated, so he took the courageous step to start his own colony and with determination and vision he prospered.

One of the most important aspects about Roger Williams is that his impact in the 1600s is still lasting today. The free lifestyle of the Providence colony he created would change the colonies and states forever. Williams got the first rights passed that were formed and pushed by the people in America. In the charter, they approved the following conditions:

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...hereafter, freely and fully have and enjoy his and their own judgments and consciences, in matters of religious concernments.¹⁰

This charter was revolutionary, no one had ever achieved the freedom of rights for a town or colony. He left a continued legacy of religious freedom in America. Even hundreds of years

⁸ Dr. Charlotte Carrington-Farmer. “Roger Williams” (Class lecture, Roger Williams University, Bristol, RI, 6th November 2014).

⁹ “THE CHARTER, GRANTED BY KING CHARLES II,” <http://livelyexperiment.org/read-the-charter/>.

¹⁰ “THE CHARTER, GRANTED BY KING CHARLES II,” <http://livelyexperiment.org/read-the-charter/>.

later when the colonies were creating the Constitution, Rhode Island would not sign until it established rights for the people.¹¹ This enacted the Ten Amendments to be put into place, including the First Amendment which decreed the freedom of religion and speech. Williams was banished for speaking his opinions and wanting the freedom to do so. He showed the world that one does not have to just accept it, people can fight back and gain the rights they deserve. It is also important to note that the first three words of the Constitution are “We the people”, not granted by the King, Queen, or God. They used to exploit religion as a way of controlling the people, saying that God intended the King to rule and if you disobey the laws, then you disobey God and will go to Hell. This is one of the reasons why Roger Williams believed there needed to be a separation of church and state, so that religion and faith would not be used in such a negative way. Those three words separate the government from religion and made the people the sovereign of the country, not an overpowering monarchy. This freedom of religion and the idea that rights could be developed with some courage and hard work, all started with Roger Williams. As Barry states, “More important was Williams’ impact on thought. He served as the first exemplar to all those Americans who would later confront power.”¹² Williams was one of the first people to really fight back against the controlling monarchy. Even today there are countries who do not have separation of church and state and it causes a great deal of havoc. America was the perfect opportunity to set up a foundation for what he believed was right and just. Providence was truly the “city upon a hill”, where people could come to be free and other cities could look to as a role model.

¹¹ Park Ranger John McNiff, “Roger Williams and Democracy” (Class guest Roger Williams University, Bristol, RI, 4th November 2014).

¹² John M. Barry, “God, Government, and Roger Williams Big Idea,” last modified January 2012, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/god-government-and-roger-williams-big-idea-6291280/?no-ist>.

Roger Williams was a noble man who worked hard to create the ideal society he believed in. Thanks to his determination, passion, and skill, he achieved what he set out to create—his Providence. Even today, he is known for his kindness and respect towards the Native Americans. Not many Englishmen could look at them as more than savages that should be converted, yet Williams learned from them and saw them as people who deserve rights as well. He gained the rights of religious freedom and true liberty, changing the world forever. It was challenging; he went to America, got exiled from the Massachusetts colony, and had to start from scratch. Despite these obstacles, he was still able to build a new colony and then attain rights and security for it. What he did then still resonates with people to this day. Other countries fight over religion and the use of it in their government causes turmoil. Thanks to Roger Williams, America accomplished a new and brighter outlook on freedom.

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