



A condensed version of the life and ministry of Roger Williams By Jim Fellure

Roger Williams was one of the most unique and picturesque persons in our early history. He left his native land and came to America at the height of the Puritan emigration, impelled by the same motives that prompted the leaders of that great exodus—to worship God according to the dictates of his conscience.

Other than the record of his birth in England in the early 1600's to James and Alice Williams, we know nothing of his childhood except that he grew up in the section of London near the great Smithfield plain, where fairs were held and "religious dissenters" were burned at the stake.

As a teen-age boy, Williams attracted the attention of the brilliant lawyer, Sir. Edward Coke, who was Chief Justice of the King's Bench. Roger had great skill in writing in shorthand, and was seen taking down sermons and long speeches in the star chamber. Seeing a great potential in him, Coke took a liking to Williams, and in 1621, arranged for him to attend the very prestigious Charterhouse School. From there he furthered his education at Pembroke College in Cambridge University where, in addition to English, he mastered the Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, and Dutch languages and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1627. After graduating from Pembroke, Williams became chaplain to the Puritan lord, Sir William Macham.

Roger Williams thought it very unjust for the state Church of England to assume control of a man's conscience and to dictate what he was to believe and how he was to worship God. If a man believed differently than the state church, or worshipped in his own way, he was branded as a religious dissenter, or heretic, and severely tortured, or even burned at the stake. Roger Williams was a strong advocate of the separation of church and state and believed in soul liberty, or, that "all men may walk as their conscience persuade them, every one in the name of

his God." It was very obvious that Roger Williams was in great conflict with the state Church of England.

On December 1, 1630, Roger Williams and his wife Mary boarded the good ship Lyon, and for more than two- months they endured a storm-tossed voyage bound for New England. On February 3, 1631, their ship launched at Nantasket, and just three days later Roger and his wife Mary arrived at Boston in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, where he was welcomed by Governor John Winthrop. Winthrop described Williams as a "godly minister" and believed the young preacher's intellect and ability were perfectly combined to attract attention in the Puritan community. However, Roger Williams refused to join the congregation at Boston. He told the startled Boston elders he would not serve a congregation that recognized the Church of England. Roger Williams had become a separatist!

Not many months passed before he received an appointment as assistant to the church in Salem. The General Court of Massachusetts did not like the choice of the Salem people. Nevertheless, the sentiment in favor of the outspoken minister was such that he was allowed to take his charge without difficulty.

At Salem matters progressed smoothly. Roger Williams' congregation was well pleased with him and showed their affection for him even after he ceased being their minister. He was not permitted, however, to remain there for more than a few months, for the "authorities" would not leave any man alone who was believed to be such a mischief-maker. By the close of summer, he was obliged to move to Plymouth. For two years he led a fairly peaceful life in his new home, but it was not an easy existence. "At Plymouth," he wrote, "I spake on the Lord's days and week days and wrought hard at the hoe for my bread."

After this, Williams was moved back to Salem to his former church and received a warm welcome. However, not long thereafter, he was brought into the Boston court and tried as a "stubborn heretic and a disturber of the civil peace." In 1635, he was ordered by the General Court to be banished from Massachusetts and was threatened with deportation to England if he did not renounce his convictions.

The sentence read,

“Whereas Mr. Roger Williams, one of the elders of the church of Salem, hath broached and divulged divers new and dangerous opinions, against the authority of magistrates, has also written letters of defamation, both of the magistrates and churches here, and that before any conviction, and yet maintaineth the same without retraction, it is therefore ordered, that the said Mr. Williams shall depart out of this jurisdiction within six weeks,...which if he neglect to perform, it shall be lawful for the governor and two of the magistrates to send him to some place out of this jurisdiction, not to return any more without license from the court.”

When the Court learned that Williams was still speaking and writing his opinions and that many people taken with his godliness were meeting in his house, they resolved to send him back to England. An officer was sent to Salem to apprehend him, but Williams, being warned by Governor Winthrop of the court’s intention, hastily bade his wife and baby daughters good-bye and left his home three days before the officer arrived.

Another problem the court of Boston had with Roger Williams was his opposition to the way the Englishmen treated the native Americans. On several occasions, Williams had befriended the Indians by voicing his opposition to the King who was giving away lands belonging to the Indians. Roger Williams had a bold and open respect for the Indians’ dignity as men and dealt with them on a basis of equality. The Indians, often suspicious and untrustworthy where other men were concerned, always showed a childlike confidence in Roger Williams and considered him their best friend. Roger Williams knew that if he could find chief Massasoit, of the Wampanoags, or Chief Canonicus, of the Narragansetts, he would be welcome and have a safe haven among them. So, “setting out from his home in January, 1636,” he sought sanctuary with his Indian friends in the Narragansett country.

It took fourteen weeks, enduring the hardships of winter in the wilderness, to locate their village, and Williams himself said of his wanderings, “For fourteen weeks I was sorely tossed in a bitter season, not knowing what bread or bed did mean, often in a stormy night, I had neither fire nor food, and no house but a Hollow tree.” When he finally located the Indian community, he was warmly received by Massasoit and Canonicus. Roger Williams expressed his gratitude for

the Indians' provision for him while dwelling among them when he wrote, "These Ravens fed me in the wilderness."

While dwelling among his Indian friends, he acquired a piece of land from Chief Massasoit. Roger Williams believed so strongly that it was the hand of God that had directed him to this very place, at this very time, and for a specific purpose that he named the place "Providence."

Several settlers from Massachusetts joined Williams, and with twelve "loving friends and neighbors," a settlement was established based on the principle of equality. Obedience to the majority was promised by all, but "only in civil things" and not in matters of religious conscience. Thus, a government unique in its day was created—a government expressly providing for religious liberty (freedom of religion) and separation between civil and ecclesiastical authority (church and state). It embodied the principle for which Roger Williams had contended for ever since his arrival in America, and for the maintenance of which he had been persecuted by the Court of Massachusetts, and, it is believed it was the first form of government recorded in the history of the world that contained an express, practical recognition of the rights of conscience.

It is believed that Roger Williams had been converted to Christ as a teenage boy, but by the time Providence Plantation was established, through the influence of some Baptists (maybe even in England) and a study of the New Testament, he embraced the Baptist doctrine and denounced his "infant baptism" in the state Church of England. Not having a "proper" Baptist minister to baptize him, he had a layman, Ezekial Holliman, baptize him by immersion. He then baptized Holliman and ten others, and so the First Baptist Church on American soil was established at Providence, in 1638. Williams remained with the little church in Providence only a few months, but he continued on friendly terms with the Baptists, being in agreement with them in their rejection of infant baptism, as in most other matters.

In 1643, Williams was sent back to England to obtain a charter to unite Providence with the settlements of Warwick, Newport, and Portsmouth. The democratic charter was obtained, and in 1647, the colony of Rhode Island was united with

Providence under a single government, and liberty of conscience was again proclaimed. The area became a safe haven for people who were persecuted for their beliefs. Baptists, Quakers, Jews, and others went there to follow their consciences in peace and safety.

Another accomplishment of Roger Williams was on May 18, 1652. Rhode Island passed the first law in North America making slavery illegal.

Roger Williams was given very little recognition for his accomplishments during his lifetime. However, this man, labeled as “the man with a windmill in his head,” stayed true to his convictions and the principles for which he sacrificed and suffered were implanted in the blood stream of America. Section 16, of the Declaration of Rights, in the Constitution of the great state of Virginia, adopted June 29, 1776, reads, “That religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience;...”

Not long after this, the framers of the Constitution of the United States came under the influence of those who had followed the principles that Roger Williams had pioneered, and in part, they included these words—“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;...”—into the Constitution of the United States of America.

While we recognize the great men who had a part in establishing religious freedom in our country—men like Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Patrick Henry, Isaac Backus, John Leland, John Clark and many others—Roger Williams stands alone as the first person to establish a government which made slavery illegal, guaranteed the separation of Church and State, and established the freedom of religion. He is also credited with starting the first Baptist church on American soil.

Dr. David Gibbs, in his great book, “One Nation Under God,” said,

“Wherever the story of freedom is told, Rhode Island’s founder, Roger Williams (1603-1683), must be remembered. He was a true pioneer for Christian liberty.

Today, Williams is sometimes represented in American history textbooks as a liberal who rejected Puritan doctrine; a virtual unbeliever. That image is totally false. Roger Williams was a man completely shaped by his faith in Jesus Christ.”



Even though the First Baptist Church in America was started in 1638, the current building was not constructed until between 1774-1775, and the era in which it was built is evidenced by open windows instead of air conditioning units. No telephone cables or electric meters, and no city streets, are to be found. The picture depicts professional quality photography and expert layout and framing, but the beauty of the picture is in the story behind it. That is the story of how Roger Williams pioneered the freedom that we, as God-fearing Americans, so freely enjoy in this great country.

May God bless you, and may God bless America.

Jim Fellure