

# *Chronicles of Brunonia*

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## The Things They Planted

Molly Jacobson

Almost four hundred years ago, Roger Williams and his companions paddled down the Seekonk River and landed on the Rhode Island shore. Surrounded by wilderness, with no outside aid and scarce resources, these first settlers slowly raised their farms and homesteads, scavenged for food, and drafted laws for their community.

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Today, relics of the first European settlers of Rhode Island are buried mentally and physically by Providence. Asphalt runs over apple orchards Thomas Angell used to own. The Old State House presides over the western part of John Sweet's fields. Waterman Street, which hugs Brown University, is the final legacy of the Englishman who lent it his name, while Brown's English Department sits atop the northern end of his garden. The first Baptist Church in America straddles the original Francis Weston homestead.

When these men and others left the Puritan settlement at Massachusetts in the early 1600s, they found immaculate countryside across the Seekonk River. Religious outcasts and enterprising colonists united to establish the Providence Plantations, laying ground for a singularly liberal colony. Today, historians herald them for their tolerance and independence. But these lofty ideals belie a more immediate human struggle. Before industry and new immigrants, the founders of Providence toiled dutifully by primitive farmhouses along the Seekonk to feed their families. In crafting their government and cultivating the land, they also planted Rhode Island.

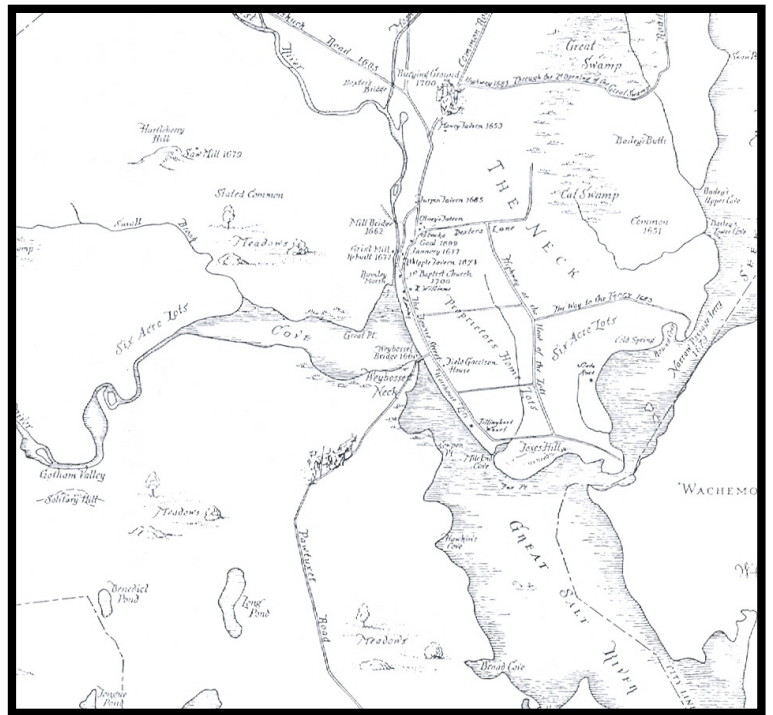
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Alonzo Chappel's definitive nineteenth century oil painting depicts the founder of Providence, arms outstretched, touching shore with greetings for bare-chested and barefooted Native Americans. No actual record exists of such a rendezvous in the wilderness. Paper was hard to come by, most settlers were illiterate, and likely more immediate concerns occupied them than record-keeping. However it occurred, the real landing was probably not romantic. Roger Williams and his followers could not even claim themselves the first white

settlers of Rhode Island. That title belonged to William Blackstone, the founder of Boston, who had decamped Massachusetts over a decade earlier huffing: “Was there not room enough for all of ye? Could ye not leave the hermit in his corner?” He lived alone on Study Hill.<sup>1</sup>

The party that splashed out of Roger Williams’ canoe in 1636—Thomas Angell, John Smith, William Harris, and Francis Wickes—soon met others who crossed the Great Salt River and found their way around Fox Point. Thirty-two in all, Providence’s founders ventured onto pristine shoreline.<sup>2</sup> Fresh springs cut across dense forests of black, white, and red oak trees. Fertile meadows thicketed with native plants sloped onto gravelly beaches. Their landing site lay by a tidewater cove at the confluence of the Moshassuck, Woonasquatucket, and Great Salt rivers.

Williams led surveying expeditions to explore the hills and



Providence’s founders landed at the intersection of the Seekonk and Great Salt rivers. They settled in the Cove and built their home lots.

<sup>1</sup> Present-day Cumberland, Rhode Island. Thomas Williams Bicknell, *The History of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations* (New York: The American Historical Society, Inc., 1920) 105.

<sup>2</sup> Glenn W. LaFantasie, ed., *The Correspondence of Roger Williams 1629-1653*, Vol. 1. (Providence, Rhode Island and Hanover, New Hampshire: Brown University Press and University Press of New England, published for The Rhode Island Historical Society, 1988) 56.

<sup>†</sup> “Map of a Portion of the Town of Providence in the English Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England, In America, In the Year 1700,” in John Hutchins Cady, F.A.I.A., *The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence* (Providence, Rhode Island: The Book Shop, 1957), 10.

forests surrounding the cove. One Englishman who would later become a prominent leader in the town, Thomas Olney, had followed Williams from Salem, Massachusetts and accompanied him on those early adventures. In the town papers he wrote: “... we went forth to search out what meadow we could find. We went first to Mashepouge and there found some... Then Mr. Williams made a motion to us to go further up Pawtuxet to search for more we assented and so we went over the river... and there we found a good quantity and Mr. Williams told us it was ours...”<sup>3</sup>

Fortunately, the settlers were on good terms with local Native Americans. Williams had taken care to pay two Narragansett sachems for land with mortgage money from his house in Salem. He also insisted on giving “some small gratuity” to tribes they encountered. This turned out to be a good survival strategy, because the pilgrims spent their initial harvest season haphazardly planting corn on old Indian fields, and huddling in makeshift wigwams through the bitter winter months.<sup>4</sup>

Undoubtedly, permanent shelter was the primary concern for settlers fleeing the Puritanical Bay State. But the philosophy and strategy for dividing up land were principally befuddled by the fact that few settlers, if any, had experience running a government. “When he left England, [Roger] Williams did not meditate the founding of a colony, or even of a town...” posited Henry Dorr, a

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Olney. Testimony as Town Deputy, August 1660. The original document is in the Harris Family Papers Collection (MSS 17, Box 1, File 2, 1641-1660), Rhode Island Historical Society Archives, Providence, RI.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Wyman Hopkins, *The Home Lots of the Early Settlers of the Providence Plantations with Notes and Plats* (Providence, Rhode Island: June 1886) 13.

19<sup>th</sup> century historian.<sup>5</sup> Simply safeguarding official town documents posed a serious obstacle. Minutes from an early town meeting about the Plantations land deed concede: “William Arnold of Pautuxet Came into this present Court and did acknowledge That... that which is wanting in the now writeing called the towne Evidence... was torne by accident in his house at Pautuxett.”<sup>6</sup>

Roger Williams had previously attempted spring planting and house raising on the other side of the Seekonk, “on the western limits of the Pokanoket,” only to be informed by Plymouth’s Governor Winslow that he was not far enough from the Plymouth Patent and would have to start elsewhere from scratch.<sup>7</sup> Now he found himself even further from civilization. More travelers trickling in pressed the need for decisive planning. Luckily for Williams, exiles from Massachusetts abounded in those days, and in the spring of 1638 two of Anne Hutchinson’s followers paid him a visit. William Coddington, a leading merchant, and the physician John Clarke, both lent their good counsel to Williams’ community of “distressed consciences.”<sup>8</sup> Both Coddington and Clarke would ultimately go on to found Portsmouth and Newport; it is likely that they advised Williams in laying out the Plantations. As volunteers continued on surveying trips across the Woonasquatucket, property allotments took shape.

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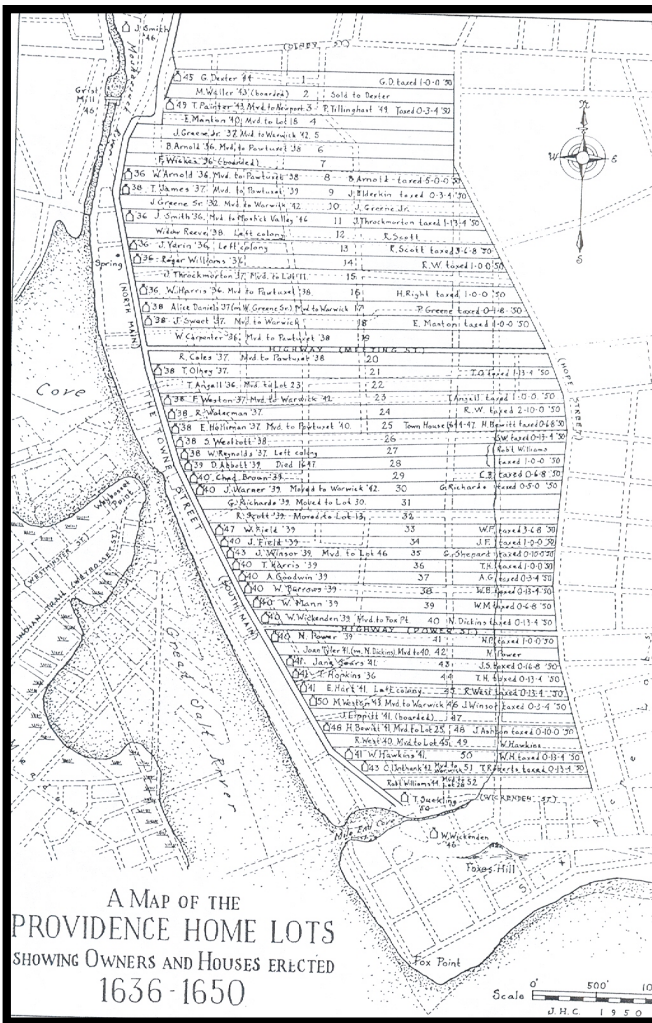
<sup>5</sup> Henry C. Dorr, *Planting and Growth of Providence: Gradual Accumulation of the Material for Domestic Comfort, The Means of Internal Communication and the Development of Local Industries* (Providence, Rhode Island: Sidney S. Rider, 1882) 3 and 8.

<sup>6</sup> Hopkins, *Home Lots of the Early Settlers*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> In fact, Governor Winslow may have done this reluctantly. Bicknell writes, “Gov. Winslow, the diplomat, tells Mr. Williams that Plymouth Colony does not wish to incur the displeasure of the Bay Colony, by harboring a banished citizen of that government, and advises him, in a friendly spirit, to cross the Seekonk to neutral territory... [his] motive was to preserve peace between the two Colonies on Massachusetts Bay” (111).

<sup>8</sup> Bicknell 112 and John B. Frantz and William Pencak, “John Clarke and His Legacies: Religion and Law in Colonial Rhode Island 1638-1750,” in *Beyond Philadelphia* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 1998) 2-3.

To each man—and in four special cases, a woman—went approximately one hundred acres. Each share divided into a five-acre home lot along “the Towne Streete” and waterline, a separate six acres for farming, “an extent of meadow or pasture land for cattle,” and some woodland.<sup>9†</sup> The idea was to give everyone an equal portion and access to street and river. Soon settlers could purchase additional land out of “stated common lots” to add to their already disjointed



The original home lots of the Providence settlers formed the shape of a smile between present-day Olney, Hope, Wickenden, and North/South Main streets.<sup>‡</sup>

estate. The ultimate effect of the amateur planning was a series of unconnected, somewhat random plots around the settlement, though the five-acre home lots came together nicely to form the orderly teeth of a smile between present-day Olney, Hope, Wickenden, and North/South Main streets.

Thomas Angell, just eighteen, counted his blessings as the youngest homeowner. His home lot near the northern highway offered ample trees for building and lay just a short

<sup>9</sup> Hutchins Cady, *The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence*, 5.

<sup>†</sup> The Towne Street comprised present-day North and South Main Streets.

walk from the spring. Just how and why he ended up in Providence remains unclear, but we can infer his extraordinary work ethic.<sup>10</sup> Angell first cleared his lot to avoid a town fine, then raised a cave-wigwam house and a garden, then a permanent house, and eventually purchased the lot behind his. He found his wife next door, the sister-in-law of his neighbor Thomas Olney.

Just ten lots up from Angell and two down from Roger Williams, John Smith, miller by trade, nested with his wife Alice and children John Jr. and Elizabeth. In 1646 the town voted him the exclusive rights to establish and operate a grist mill. Though Williams disliked the Smiths—they were always calling others “devils”—the undeniable value of their mill may have redeemed the family.<sup>11</sup> For town meetings, informal gatherings, and religious services, Providence settlers tramped up the Moshassuck River to congregate in the building’s large interior. Mondays and Tuesdays were for the “grinding of the Corne of the Towne”—although the town clerk blundered here, because the Smiths operated a stamp mill to pound rather than grind corn.<sup>12</sup>

A mill at the forefront of the Providence community emerges logically. Poor in most things, the settlers were rich in corn. Thick-kernelled maize—the colonizer’s crop—nourished man and his livestock, resisted disease, and boasted

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<sup>10</sup> Angell may have been related to Roger Williams, or he may have accompanied Williams from England in the *Lyon* as his servant. Despite his illiteracy, Angell later rose to General Assembly member, constable, and town clerk, always signing the two words he could write—his name—with a characteristic flourish.

\* “A Map of the Providence Home Lots: Showing Owners and Houses erected 1636-1650,” in Hutchins Cady, *The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence*, 10. Dotted lines indicate highway pattern in 1950.

<sup>11</sup> Howard Chapin, “Sketch 75” in *Our Rhode Island Ancestors*, a collection of clippings of his historical articles written during his tenure as Rhode Island Historical Society librarian between 1912-1940. In the possession of the Rhode Island Historical Society (Reading Room: CT 258 C41).

<sup>12</sup> Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development of Providence*, 7.

high yields and a short growth cycle. Twelve bushels of corn bought alternatively one Indian slave, 1000 pounds of wool, or three fat sheep. Corn traveled well. Roger Williams could carry corn grain “sufficient for a man three or four daies,” which proved crucial for colonists on the move.<sup>13</sup> The settlers harvested acres of corn those first growing seasons. If their gardens paralleled those typical of seventeenth century New England, they also planted grapes, plums, cherries, strawberries, cabbage, and root vegetables such as parsnips and carrots.

The more they planted, the more they learned. Conditions were initially backbreaking. Such primitive isolation garnered no interest from wealthier, more established colonists in Salem, Plymouth, or Dorchester, Massachusetts. Thus the Providence group was largely young and poor, with little farming experience and no assets. They tilled their fields by hand: only thirty plows existed in the neighboring Bay State at the time. Roger Williams described his company as “poor and destitute.” Even Governor Winslow, who had refused to grant them asylum in Plymouth, pityingly pressed a gold piece into Mary Williams’ hand after touring the Plantations: “for her relief.”<sup>14</sup>

Though scorned, Providence’s colonists were not forgotten. Rather, they gained authority as planters. Williams’s reports to Massachusetts Governor Winthrop lend a sense of their expertise. “Some while since You desired a word of

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<sup>13</sup> Corn characteristics: Arturo Warman, *Corn & Capitalism: How a Botanical Bastard Grew to Global Dominance*, tran. Nancy L. Westrate (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2003) 73.

Purchasing power of corn: George Leland Miner, *Angel’s Lane: The History of a Little Street in Providence*, (Providence, Rhode Island: Akerman-Standard Press, 1948).

Roger Williams quotation: Roger Williams, *A Key into the Language of America*, reprinted for the Rhode Island and Providence Plantations Tercentenary Committee, Inc., (Providence, Rhode Island, 1936), originally printed in London by Gregory Dexter, 1643.

<sup>14</sup> Bicknell, *History of Rhode Island*, 111, and Dorr, *Planting and Growth of Providence*, 10 and 55.



direction about the hay seed. I desired my brother to collect his owne and other neighbors observation about it..." he penned in May 1647. He directed the governor to maintain "3 bushlls seede to one Acre land" and "sow it upon a rayne preceeding." Evidently the colonists had discovered both wind and cattle dung as highly effective planting vehicles. Williams reminded the governor not to grow hay near fruit trees lest it plunder their nutrients.<sup>15</sup>

Settlers of the Plantations perpetuated some traditions that would become distinctly New England. For protein, they plunged their hands into the biting cold saltwater of the Seekonk and fumbled for quahogs. The river clay teemed with these fat bivalves, whose purple shells local Indians traded as 'wampum.' In addition to this dietary mainstay, the settlers harvested maple sugar as a sweetener and pressed grapes for wine. Though he preferred his books to the company of others, the hermit William Blackstone may have descended Study Hill to grant his neighbors his beloved 'Yellow Sweetings' seeds. This apple variety was perhaps "the richest and most delicious apple of the whole kind," and Rhode Islanders mulled it into cider, piping hot in the winter and cold in the summer.<sup>16</sup> Their chief indulgence, however, was boiled bass, which they savored without butter. After all, cows cost a whopping 30 pounds, and it took several years to convert the coarse native grass of the Ocean State into grazing meadow.<sup>17</sup>

During friendlier periods in their on-again, off-again relationship, local Native Americans undoubtedly aided the colonists' understanding of the land and

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<sup>15</sup> Letter to John Winthrop, Jr. 28 May 1647. In LaFantasie, *Correspondence of Roger Williams*.

<sup>16</sup> Bicknell, *History of Rhode Island*, 106, and Miner, *Angel's Lane*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Dorr, *Planting and Growth of Providence*, 13 and 57.

good growing techniques. Roger Williams, who spoke fluent Narragansett, touted local Indian tribes for their frugality and graciousness:

“Sometimes God gives them fish or flesh,  
Yet they’re content without,  
And what comes in, they put to friends  
And strangers round about.”<sup>18</sup>

In 1667, John Steere legally ceded management of about six acres of his farmland to Sam Noforce, an Indian who “hath for sum years lived by mee and hath well behaved himself towards mee and mine.”<sup>19</sup> Other settlers hired Indians to tend to their animals, enabling them to focus on their fields, though Henry Dorr speculates that some “unfaithful” Indian shepherds may have hawked swine and goats to vessels passing on the Narragansett Bay, pocketing the proceeds.<sup>20</sup> Providence’s early town records frequently allude to the “Ancient men” with a mixture of friendship and suspicion. In July of 1652 an entry in the town books headed “Cloath suspected to be stoale” accuses an Indian of stealing a parcel of trading cloth and mandates its transfer into the hands of the town treasurer for safeguarding. Certainly, Roger Williams had his hands full trying to maintain mutual respect between the Native Americans and the settlers. He encouraged his

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<sup>18</sup> Roger Williams, as quoted in Jack L. Davis, “Roger Williams among the Narragansett Indians,” (Boston, *The New England Quarterly*, 1970) 597. Accessed through JSTOR on April 10, 2008 via <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/view/363134?seq=5>>.

<sup>19</sup> Horatio Rogers, George Moulton Carpenter and Edward Field, editors, *The Early Records of the Town of Providence: Volume 1, Being the First Book of the Town of Providence Otherwise Called the Long Old Book with Parchment Cover*, printed under Authority of the City Council of Providence (Providence, RI: Snow & Farnham City Printers, 1892).

<sup>20</sup> Horatio Rogers, George Moulton Carpenter and Edward Field, editors, *The Early Records of the Town of Providence: Volume 1, Being the First Book of the Town of Providence Otherwise Called the Long Old Book with Parchment Cover*, printed under Authority of the City Council of Providence (Providence, RI: Snow & Farnham City Printers, 1892).

followers to learn from the tribes and respect their expertise, and during the friendliest times, some did. But over time, settlers viewed their neighbors with increasing mistrust. Williams' fervent diplomacy may have prevented disaster those first forty years.

With Governor Winthrop's help, Williams made another lifesaving decision on behalf of the colony. In Massachusetts he had witnessed horses, cattle, and goats perish at the teeth of vicious wolves. He understood the futility of raising livestock on the home lots; the settlers could not afford fences, and besides, animals needed a salt marsh nearby to produce richer milk.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, with the Governor's assent, Williams bought and converted Prudence Island, a tiny speck on the Great Salt River, into a "market garden and stock farm" for goats and pigs until the settlers could get a better footing.

Those colonists who chose to keep farm animals on their home lots rather than Prudence Island provoked minor incidents. A document among the Providence Town Papers recounts a complaint made by Robert West on August 27, 1636, that Thomas Angell had assaulted his swine. According to witness testimony, Angell cornered and attacked West's pigs with a pitchfork when they trespassed on his five-acre lot, killing a sow and leaving others "bruised as black as shoe." Arbitrators forced Angell to provide compensation, vindicating West.<sup>22</sup>

For these and more serious altercations, common laws steered the men and women pioneers of Rhode Island. "Hitherto, the masters of Families have ordinarily mett once a fort night and consulted about our common peace, watch,

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<sup>21</sup> Rowley Historical Society 2005. Accessible via <<http://www.rowleyhistoricalsociety.org/common/index.php?com=RHS&div=AA&nav=AA&page=A18>>.

<sup>22</sup> LaFantasie, *Correspondence of Roger Williams*, 228.

and planting...” Roger Williams attested in an early letter to John Winthrop. “Mutuall consent hath finished all matters with speede and peace... Our dangers (in the midst of these dens of Lyons) now especially, call upon us to be Compact in a Civill way and power.”<sup>23</sup> Practical rules drawn up by the community’s leading men governed the colonists in their homes and in town life. These laws included: no selling liquor to the Indians (at a penalty of twelve pounds), no selling fields or lots to foreigners “without consent of the Towne,” and no showing up later than “aboue one quarter of an howre” to a town meeting.

Equally earnest were municipal attempts to regulate planting and building. Natural resources abounded, but if the founders failed to curb those who would greedily plunder the landscape or to coax settlers away from their own farm work for public needs, all would suffer. They faced the classic Tragedy of the Commons.<sup>24</sup> As the howling winds of December approached, the town deployed two men to supervise those who would fell timber on the common for firewood. To maintain the roadways, it was decreed “that every man shall mend and make good the high way before his house Lot or Lots... so that Carts may passe & repasse freely,” and eventually that all men should toil on the highways three days a year, lending their horses and oxen to the cause. Additionally, if rebels like

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<sup>23</sup> Letter to John Winthrop, before August 25, 1636 (Providence). In LaFantasie, *Correspondence of Roger Williams*, 72.

<sup>24</sup> The Tragedy of the Commons is a popular economic dilemma that gets its name from 17<sup>th</sup>-century community-owned pastures, called commons, where each villager could send his livestock for grazing. Villagers had an incentive to send their cattle to the commons, instead of grazing them on their own private lands, because that way they could protect their personal property from overuse. Ultimately, the commons were degraded so much due to constant use that they would not support any villager’s cattle. “This [was a] failure of private incentives to provide adequate maintenance of public resources...” The overhasting of timber by Providence’s first settlers constitutes another such failure. Source: Daniel McFadden, “The Tragedy of the Commons: A Nobel laureate’s warning on the Net’s shared resources,” *Forbes Magazine* September 1, 2001, accessed April 10, 2008 via <<http://www.forbes.com/asap/2001/0910/061.html>>.

Francis Weston and Richard Waterman stubbornly continued to resist preparations “to fence to plaunt to build etc” their land, the town would fine them. The forefathers graciously accommodated incentives into their planning. A “halfe penny a head” rewarded hunters for each vexatious wolf shot within the Providence limits.

Surely the primary rules of Providence did not suit everyone. Many settlers came and left, as evidenced by the countless lot sales and home exchanges that fill early town records. Those who would not stay settled elsewhere, in Pawtuxet, Newport, Aquetneck Island, Portsmouth, or Massachusetts. Joshua Verin, one of Roger Williams’ original companions, proved one infamous case. Although the town council held that the right to religious liberty applied to both men *and* women, Verin vehemently objected to his wife Jane’s presence at religious services. Roger Williams disdained him, and his peers disenfranchised him. “Deal not worse with me than with the Indians,” Verin sputtered on paper in 1650. “My coming away could not disinherit me. Some of you cannot but remember that we six which came first should have the first convenience...” He ultimately relocated his family to Salem, one bitterly unsatisfied ex-proprietor of the Providence Plantations.

So they could not please everyone; but then, “The founders of Providence may be excused for some errors of policy, as they were unpracticed in a work which was thrust upon them—to be done with such instruments as were at their command,” writes Henry Dorr. The fact that these pioneers even managed to raise their fields, houses, and barns; to feed and clothe their young families; and to draw up universal codes of conduct, is a testament to their resolve. Ironically,

they worked so hard that we know relatively little about them. Up before the nighttime haze cleared the sky, sinking into creaky beds by candlelight, the first Rhode Islanders can be excused for taking neither the time nor the precious cotton paper to scrawl us the few words they could write. The precious clues they *did* leave dwindle. Symbolic Slate Rock, Roger Williams' landing site, was accidentally dynamited in 1877 by Providence city workers trying to preserve it. Today we stand upon their plots and homes, walking on the land into which they poured their sweat, and yet we continue to piece together traces of their world. Four hundred years later, we bear the fruition of the things they planted.

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