

Slavery in Rhode Island

We think of Roger Williams as a defender of freedom – especially when it came to “soul liberty,” the essential freedom to worship God in one’s own way. He also defended the freedom of others, allowing people he disagreed with (for example, Quakers) to live in Rhode Island without any of the restrictions they faced in Massachusetts. Then there were all the simple daily freedoms he promoted – he permitted anyone to cross the lands claimed by Rhode Island, and he generally supported the rights of all peoples to live in the way that they chose. He was far closer to the Native peoples of New England than any of the leaders of the neighboring colonies. He traveled with them, lived among them, and offered the hospitality of his home to them whenever they came through Providence.

But Roger was also a man of his time, and in the 17th century, slavery was widely practiced around the world. Slavery was not then what it became later – a highly-regulated system of labor, supported by the full might of the state, that kept vast numbers of people, especially people of African descent, in a permanent state of bondage. But slavery was beginning to become those things, and Roger was present as Rhode Island began its path toward slave-trading. Sometimes he was personally involved.

In the 17th century, slavery was a common form of punishment for fighting on the wrong side of a war. Many Native captives were enslaved this way. There were many local wars, between different Natives, or between Natives and the English and their allies. After each of them, the winning side, including the English and their Native allies, would decide what to do with the captives.

This was in keeping with both Native and English practice. Natives routinely kept prisoners of war, including women and children of the defeated, whom they would integrate into their tribes after a conflict had ended. The English, too, had experience with forms of slavery. Some of the earliest English explorers had experienced long forms of servitude – John Smith, one of the founders of Virginia, was a prisoner of war in Turkey for years.

But as Natives were sent further and further away – to Barbados, in the Caribbean – it became highly unlikely that they could return to their homes, as John Smith did. Slavery became harsher, and it contributed to the decimation of the Native Americans. It also helped to launch the African slave trade, because Native trades were often traded for Africans in the Caribbean.

During his long life, Roger displayed several different attitudes toward slavery. When trying to define his idea of freedom, he might use the language of slavery. For example, in 1654, in a letter to Providence, describing his vision for Rhode Island, he wrote that he wanted “to keep up the name of a people, a free people, not enslaved to the bondages and iron yokes of the great.”

Roger never wrote a long statement about slavery, but as a young man, he seemed to disapprove. After the Pequot War, he urged his friend John Winthrop, the Governor of Massachusetts, not to enslave Native captives for a long time. In one letter, from July 31, 1637, Roger asked that John Winthrop rethink the policy of “perpetuall slaverie,” and instead “set free” the Pequot captives who had just lost a war to the English and the Narragansett.

Roger also supported a Rhode Island law passed in 1652 that limited the time a person might be enslaved to ten years and specifically tried to prevent the enslavement of Africans.

But during the time of King Philip’s War, forty years later, Roger was not so forgiving. There is growing evidence that Natives fought King Philip’s War because they were angry over slavery, in addition to their unhappiness that their land was disappearing. But the English, including Roger, were also upset, especially as the war touched close to home. All of his efforts to avoid the war had failed; his house had been burned to the ground, along with many others in Providence, and most of his belongings were destroyed. After the Wampanoag and Narragansett had been defeated by the English, there were many captives, and in August

1676, Roger led a group of Providence citizens who arranged their sale into slavery, and he received a portion of the proceeds (RIHS "[Twelve Bushels of Corn](#)" curriculum). A majority of these captives were enslaved locally, but about a quarter of them were sent to the West Indies, where they had little chance of survival.

In the years that followed, Rhode Island showed a mixed record on slavery. Rhode Islanders would propose limits to slavery at several moments – in 1652, 1676 (just before the enslavement of the captives), in 1784, and again in 1843. But Rhode Island sea captains were very active in the slave trade that began to bring Africans in large numbers to America (after Roger's time), and slavery existed here in Rhode Island, as well. The first African slaves brought to Rhode Island arrived in 1696, when a Boston ship, the *Seaflower*, brought 47 slaves from Africa and sold 14 in Newport. In the 18th century, a thriving slave society grew in "the Narragansett Country" – a part of what is today South County.

By the time of the Civil War, Rhode Islanders were nearly unanimous in opposing slavery, but Rhode Island businesses traded extensively with the South, and many local mills depended on cotton that came from the slave south.

Even into the 20th and 21st centuries, we have seen how many obstacles there are to building a world of diversity and equality for all. For a long time, this painful history was hidden from view, but it has become an important topic for the next generation of historians. Rhode Islanders can never be too vigilant in seeking answers to these difficult questions.

Resources:

Colin Calloway, *After King Philip's War: Presence and Persistence in Indian New England*

Jay Coughtry, *The Notorious Triangle; Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade, 1700-1807*

Linford Fisher, "Why Should Wee Have Peace to Bee Made Slaves: Indian Surrenderers During and After King Philip's War" (forthcoming in *Ethnohistory*)

Lorenzo J. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*

"Indian Slaves of King Philip's War," *Rhode Island Historical Society Publications* 1 (1893-1894), 234-238

Arline Ruth Kiven, *Then Why the Negroes: The Nature and Course of the Anti-Slavery Movement in Rhode Island, 1637-1861*

Glenn LaFantaisie, editor, *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*

Glenn LaFantaisie and Paul Campbell, "Scattered to the Winds of Heaven: Narragansett Indians, 1676-1880," *Rhode Island History* (August 1978)

J. Stanley Lemons, "Rhode Island and the Slave Trade," *Rhode Island History* (Fall 2002)

Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860*

Joanne Pope Melish, "Rhode Island Slavery and its Legacies," in *The Freedom Talks: Reflections from Rhode Island Scholars*

William Pierson, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Subculture in Eighteenth-Century New England*

John Sainsbury, "Indian Labor in Early Rhode Island," *New England Quarterly* (September 1975)

[Slavery and Justice Report \(2006\)](#)

Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America*

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