

## Founding of Rhode Island

Rhode Island's beginnings are closely entwined with the figure of **Roger Williams**. A graduate of Cambridge University, Williams had first migrated to Massachusetts Bay Colony in search of a more "pure" Christian community. But Williams's belief that the state should not control religious matters—and that European settlers should only occupy land bought fairly from Indigenous peoples—put him at odds with Massachusetts authorities. Forced to flee in 1636, Williams found refuge with the **Narragansett** tribe, who granted him land along the Moshassuck River. There, he founded **Providence**, intended as a model of religious freedom and fair dealings with Native Americans.

Not long after, a group led by **Anne Hutchinson** left Massachusetts for similar reasons. Hutchinson had been exiled for hosting religious meetings that challenged Puritan orthodoxy. She and her followers settled on **Aquidneck Island** (also called Rhode Island), founding towns like Portsmouth and Newport. These communities joined Providence and other settlements to form the basis of what would become the colony of Rhode Island.

## The First Settlers

The earliest population of Rhode Island was a diverse tapestry of people escaping religious or political persecution. In addition to Puritan dissenters, the colony attracted **Baptists**, **Quakers**, and even some early **Jewish** settlers. This variety stemmed from the colony's commitment to **religious tolerance**, which was nearly unparalleled in 17th-century America.

Another critical aspect was the relatively **egalitarian** ethos. While property-owning men typically held the reins of civil governance, Rhode Island's separation of church and state opened civic life to more people than in colonies like Massachusetts, where voting was often tied to church membership.

## Geography and Climate

Rhode Island, smallest in size among the original thirteen colonies, is characterized by its **coastal location** and extensive shoreline around Narragansett Bay. This geographic advantage fostered significant maritime activities, from fishing to transatlantic trade. The soil inland is variable—some areas are suitable for farming, while others are rocky, limiting crop production. Nevertheless, many settlers cleared modest plots for **mixed agriculture** that could support a family.

The **moderate climate** means winters, while cold, are less severe than in interior New England, and summers benefit from ocean breezes. The bay not only moderated temperatures but also created a natural transportation route. Trade boats could move from Providence to Newport and out into the Atlantic, connecting Rhode Island to broader colonial and international markets.

## Jobs and Economy

Early Rhode Island settlers engaged in a **mixed economy**, balancing subsistence farming with increasing **commercial pursuits**. In coastal towns:

1. **Fishing and Whaling:** While not as extensive as in Massachusetts, fishermen harvested cod and other fish for both local consumption and export.
2. **Trade:** Newport, in particular, became a hub for merchants. Its excellent harbor allowed for regular shipping routes to the West Indies and beyond. Merchants traded local products like fish, livestock, and lumber for sugar, molasses, and other goods.
3. **Shipbuilding:** Although not the largest shipbuilding center, Rhode Island still produced smaller vessels essential for fishing and the West Indies trade.

Inland, **small farms** dotted the landscape. Settlers cultivated wheat, corn, and other staple crops, supplemented with livestock. Because farmland was limited, many farmers combined agriculture with some form of trade or craft to sustain themselves.

## Government and Democracy

Rhode Island's distinctive governance was shaped by **Roger Williams's** ideals. He insisted on the separation of church and state, believing religious conviction could not be genuine if enforced by law. As a result, the colony's towns practiced **self-rule** through town meetings, where local decisions were made by majority vote among freeholders. These gatherings proved critical in forging a democratic spirit, albeit with property-based voting restrictions that were common across the colonies.

The colony's pioneering stance on **religious freedom** set it apart. In 1663, Rhode Island secured a **royal charter** from King Charles II, which recognized the principle of liberty of conscience and reinforced the colony's authority to govern itself. This charter, remarkably liberal for its time, remained the foundation of Rhode Island's government well into the 19th century. It exemplified the colony's reputation as a refuge from religious persecution and an experiment in broader civic participation.