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Erasure: From Moshassuck to Providence

Today, Roger Williams is remembered as one of America's founding fathers. He is often identified in national histories as a pioneer of the **ideology** seeking the separation of church and state. But in Rhode Island, Williams is mostly remembered as the **progenitor** of Providence and the creator of the colony/state. It is no wonder then that at least four statues of Williams **adorn** the capital city. In addition to this, a National Park, Rhode Island's central park, a zoo, a middle school, and a university are named in his honor. School children learn that Williams "founded" Providence in 1636 after being **exiled** from the colonies of Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth because of his **progressive** beliefs. But the framing of Williams as the **architect** of Providence **obscures** a past in which Native peoples crafted and **stewarded** the landscape Williams found when he first arrived at **Moshassuck**—the place that is known today as Providence.

Moshassuck, which means "moose hunting grounds," was one of the most productive ecosystems in North America. Two freshwater springs kept the gently rolling fields irrigated and periodic flooding ensured their fertility. The Woonasquatucket River swelled with salmon, and the banks of the salt cove were teeming with **Quahogs**. Sweet grasses, tree nuts, and fruit-bearing flora attracted fowl, deer, and of course, moose to the area. The location looked to be heaven on earth which might help to explain why Williams decided to call the place Providence. Later in life, while recounting his arrival in Moshassuck, Williams wrote that it was "God's merciful providence unto me in my distress" that had brought the reverend to this lush and productive landscape.¹

However, the abundance that Williams encountered when he arrived in Moshassuck in 1636 was not **preordained**. Nor was the bounty the product of natural **happenstance**. Instead, Native peoples planned, crafted, and maintained the ecosystem at Moshassuck for thousands of years. They planted crops in the fields, they managed the woodlands with controlled burns, they removed

¹ Usher Parsons M.D., "Indian Names of Places in Rhode Island" (2006). Distinctive Collections (Miscellaneous). Paper 1.

https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/sc_pubs/1https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/sc_pubs/1. (Accessed June 2, 2022). For information about the flora and fauna found in Rhode Island's salt pond ecosystems see, Alan Leveillee, Joseph Waller, and Donna Ingham. "Dispersed Villages in the Late Woodland Period South-Coastal Rhode Island." *Archaeology of Eastern North America* 34 (2006): 71–89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40914497>.



obstructions so that fish could spawn upriver, and they created rock ledges in the cove to **stimulate** the collection of shellfish.²

Still, many **narratives** of Rhode Island's early history declare that Williams arrived in an unbroken wilderness. Such accounts **posit** that it was Williams and his followers who felled the trees, created the meadows, and tamed the wilds.³ These **apocryphal** retellings reframed Euro-American settlers as the original **claimants** to the territory because they were believed to be the first to reap productivity from what had been idle land. The historian Jean O'Brien explains that it was this **fictionalization** that allowed Euro-Americans to **legitimate** "their claim to the land" and reinterpret "New England as their own."⁴ This reimagining of Rhode Island's history **perpetuates** a **settler-colonial framework** that assigns **primacy** to the actions of Euro-American "pioneers," and interprets Indigenous peoples as mostly **inconsequential**. Moreover, this framework helps to rationalize and justify the **dispossession** of the region's Native population

Today, few people know the name Moshassuck. The term is not recorded in most regional histories. School children do not learn about Moshassuck in their studies, and the name is mostly absent from the landscape. There are no statues, parks, zoos, national monuments, or universities in Providence commemorating the Native peoples who allowed Williams to settle at Moshassuck and to enjoy the abundance created by their labor. In recovering and retelling the history of Moshassuck, we not only reveal a more complete and inclusive accounting of the past, but we also honor the labor and sacrifices of those who have helped to create the providence sought by many who continue to make Rhode Island their home.

² Kathleen J. Bragdon, *Native People of Southern New England 1500-1650* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 63-67, 128. See also, Julie A. Fisher and David J. Silverman, *Ninigret, Sachem of the Niantics and Narragansetts: Diplomacy, War, and the Balance of Power in Seventeenth-Century New England and Indian Country* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 13.

³ Samuel George Arnold, *History of the state of Rhode Island and Providence plantations*. Vol. 1. (New York [etc.]: D. Appleton & co., 1859-60), 72-73, Sabin Americana: History of the Americas, 1500-1926.

https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CY0103879014/SABN?u=prov98893&sid=gale_marc&id=b4488ebd&pg=83 (Accessed September 8, 2022).

⁴ Jean M. O'Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out Of Existence In New England* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 55.