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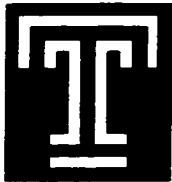
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PREVIEW



**Temple University  
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 (Please type) in a Native American Community"

*Author:* Wendi-Star Brown  
 (Please type)

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Dissertation Examining Committee:(please type)

Read and Approved By:(Signatures)

Judy Goode  
 Dissertation Advisory Committee Chairperson

Judy Goode

George Roth

George Roth

Robert Schneider

Robert A. Schneider

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Sydney White  
 Examining Committee Chairperson

Sydney White  
 If Member of the Dissertation Examining Committee

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Date \_\_\_\_\_

Sheryl B. Runck  
 (Dean of the Graduate School)

PREVIEW

**THE CHURCH IS THE PEOPLE: THE ROLE OF A CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN A  
NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITY**

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**A Dissertation  
Submitted to  
The Temple University Graduate Board**

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**In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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**By  
Wendi-Starr Brown  
January, 2002**

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PREVIEW

**ABSTRACT**

**The Church Is the People: The Role of a Christian Church in A  
Native American Community**

**Doctor of Philosophy  
Temple University, 2002**

**Doctoral Advisory Committee Chair: Dr. Judith G. Goode**

**This dissertation examines the political role of a Christian church in a New England Native American community, not only within the tribe's political structure, but in the matrix of local, state and Federal policies as well. It addresses two major issues. First, the introduction of Christianity has not been the unmitigated evil in Native American societies, as it has often been portrayed, and being a Christian necessarily mean the death of one's identity as an Indian. Second, it challenges the definition of 'tradition' as something fixed and static and replaces it with a definition that emphasizes the legitimacy of tradition as something that a community views as its unique property, no matter whether or not it has changed over time.**

**The Narragansett Indians were first missionized in the 1640's, but few converted until a socially relevant and culturally acceptable form of Christianity was introduced a full one hundred years later. The church institution that grew out of this conversion provided stability for the tribe for the next 200 years until a series of Federal legislation provided a means for the tribe to establish and maintain a form of tribal government separate from that of the church. As more resources become available through the tribe, fewer recognized the authority of the church. However, those who continue to attend the church**



(particularly older women) view themselves as guardians of tribal traditions. They assert this role particularly at times of ceremonial and cultural gatherings, sometimes to the frustration of the younger, mostly male, elected leadership. The church building itself has also become an important and well-known symbol to non-Indians as well, and an arsonist's attempt to destroy it in 1993 actually served to increase the church's visibility in the community at large.

Field research was conducted from September of 1997 through August of 1998, and included participant observation and interviews.

PREVIEW

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my mother, Mary Stanton Brown, who has put up with a 31-year old child still “in school” after all these years, and who has endured repeated pleas for money and patience during the dissertation process- thank you. Without you, this dissertation would not have been possible. Although my father Archie C. Brown passed away while I was still a freshman in college, the memory of his humor has often sustained me in moments of hair-pulling frustration. The memory of Helen Stanton, my maternal grandmother, not only sustained me, but actually spurred my research in the first place. I have called on her memory many times in the course of this dissertation, and I dedicate this work to her.

Dr. Judith Goode, my advisor, pointed out connections and relationships in my data that enabled me to see the work in an entirely new light. She endured my repeated pleas for extensions with immense patience and good-humor, and reviewed countless drafts in order to point me in the right direction. Dr. Robert Schneider made many useful comments, and Dr. Sydney White spent an incredible amount of time helping me ‘get it right’. I owe a special debt to Dr. George Roth of the Bureau of Indian Affairs Bureau of Acknowledgement and Research, who put up with great swaths of silence from me before having several hundred pages descend all at once. Thanks to my entire committee.

The members of the Narragansett Indian Church are the foundation of this project. They allowed me to spend a year attending services, bake sales, meetings and every other event of their calendar, and I thank them for permitting me to do so. And to the members of the Narragansett Indian Tribe, *taubotneanawayean*. You are all my relatives.

I received financial support from Temple University during the course of my graduate career, first in the form of a Future Faculty Fellowship stipend, and then with a Dissertation Completion Grant. The Future Faculty Fellowship program has been especially supportive, and I thank them for their generosity.

Finally, and most importantly, by whatever name the deity is known- Creator, God, Jesus, Kautontawitt- I have called on all of those names and more during grad school, and will no doubt continue to do so for the rest of my life. All thanks and praise goes to the One Above.

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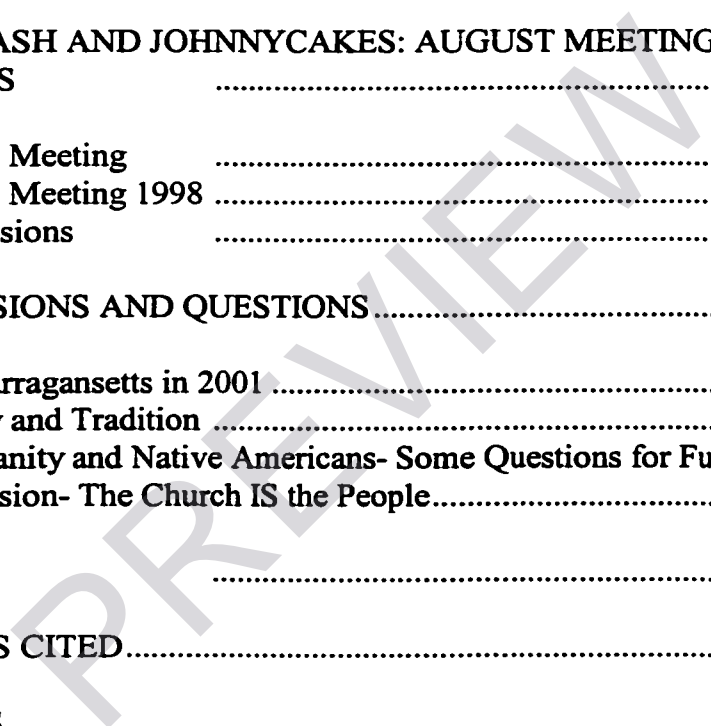
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**MAP OF THE STATE OF RHODE ISLAND**

**MAP OF THE TOWN OF CHARLESTOWN**



## **CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION**

This study explores the role of a Christian independent church in a Native American community. My research demonstrates that the Narragansett Indian Church has played an important role in maintaining tribal identity in the face of various colonial, state, and Federal policies designed to eliminate Narragansett identity. Preservation of culture is not something Christian churches in Native communities are credited with, but the specific historical and political circumstances surrounding the Narragansetts resulted in the emergence of the church as a site for resistance against the dominant society. Aside from their role in providing places to worship, churches in ethnic communities often aid in maintaining the distinctive, collective identity that distinguishes that particular group from the larger society. For example, churches are often among the few public places where the first language of the community is spoken (at least occasionally). Feasts or festivals sponsored by churches replicate celebrations held in 'the old country'(this is especially true of the Italian-American and Portuguese-American Catholic churches in the area where I grew up). Conversely, they can also serve as places where the 'Americanization' of parishioners can take place- for example, by aiding in finding housing and employment for newly-arrived members, offering language classes for non-English speakers, and assisting newcomers in negotiating with bureaucratic agencies. Churches are also sites for political action, both as loci for actual campaigning and as places where people's complaints are articulated and where protests are organized. For example, in a city like Philadelphia, politicians of all ethnic backgrounds need to court

the large numbers of votes held by African-Americans. Speeches and appearances at such churches are considered to be a gauge of the politician's attitude about social justice and racism. The literature is also full of examples of protest action emanating from and supported by African-American churches, particularly during the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960's, but reaching even farther back in time to the days of slavery. The works of James Cone and Cornell West address the praxis of theological activity and political action, describing how African-Americans responded to the particular pressures of slavery, segregation, and discrimination to form the dynamic institutions known collectively as "the Black church".

The rise of liberation theology and its accompanying political action among the indigenous peoples of Latin America is one of the most dramatic instances of mobilization in Catholic and Protestant congregations. This movement called for a dramatic revision of the social order and an abandonment of philosophies that would consign the poor and oppressed to suffer this life quietly while looking forward to a heavenly reward in the next. Instead, liberation theologians preached a doctrine in which the meek truly would inherit the earth, by uniting and working for social and political change. Although it began in Latin America, this philosophy soon spread throughout the world, into Africa, the Philippines, and into poor communities into the United States. This empowerment of the downtrodden was a direct challenge to the established authorities, and many people active in the movement were accused of being Communists; the Catholic Church removed themselves from the controversy by eventually replacing or admonishing those who interpreted the Gospel in a manner the hierarchy deemed "Marxist". The 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus* "identified free enterprise as the

driving force behind successful economies that also respects the dignity of the human person” (Sirico 1996: 27-8). That free enterprise has, in fact, continued the oppression of poor human persons is an issue that remains unaddressed.

With so much research into the role churches have played in minority populations, it is surprising that more has not been done on the role of churches in Native American communities. Native Americans, after all, have been aggressively targeted by missionaries since First Contact. Catholic priests and nuns were very active among the Iroquois, Micmac, and other tribes in what is now Maine, Vermont, New York and Canada. Congregationalists, Episcopalians and other Protestant denominations in colonial New England established schools and villages for the “Praying Indians” who converted. In the Southeast, many members of the Five Civilized Tribes became committed Christians before and during the horrific Trail of Tears relocation to Oklahoma (Weaver 1998: 1-2; Noley 1998: 48-50). After the Civil War, President Grant’s Peace Policy gave financial support to various denominations willing to take up the task of ‘civilizing’ the tribes of the Great Plains. Some of the Iroquois Catholics went westward to find work and acted as lay missionaries among the Flathead, who later requested a Catholic presence in their own community (Vecsey 1997: 275). Tribes in California had been Catholic for years, and had been the main labor force in building the now-famous missions. Many of the Indians were so thoroughly identified by their relationship with the missions that they were (and are) referred to as Mission Indians. Other tribes in the American Southwest had also been acquainted with the Catholic Church during the days when they had been subject to the Spanish and then Mexican governments. The tribes in the far north of Alaska had become bilingual Russian



Orthodox Christians, which was even more disconcerting to the American Protestants of the McKinley administration as if they had been totally unchurched (Weaver 1998:6). Still, with all the attention given to Native populations by missionaries, the focus in research has often been on Pre-Contact spirituality or on syncretic religions such as the Native American Church (and its sacramental use of peyote, a hallucinogenic plant). Natives and non-Natives have been rightly critical of the manner in which Natives were forced to convert (at least nominally) in church-sponsored schools and institutions. Many missionaries saw no value in indigenous religions, and were instrumental in prohibiting and driving underground such practices as the Sun Dance. Other historians have named missionaries, well intentioned or not, as accomplices in the dispossession of Indian lands and the destruction of Native culture. Tinker's *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Genocide* (1993) and Noley's *First White Frost: Native Americans and United Methodism* (1991) are two such indictments. Furthermore, there has been an increase in the number of Native people who choose to engage in Pre-Contact spiritual practices (some originating in their particular tribes, others, such as particular versions of the Sweat Lodge and Vision Quest, have their origins among other tribes but have now become almost universally defined as "Indian"). Often, these people have had very negative experiences with Christian institutions as well as with individual Christians, and see little value in Christianity at all.

At the same time, Native people did not accept uncritically the various versions of Christianity that they were offered by nuns, priests and missionaries. Some tribes rejected certain versions of Christianity until they encountered one that suited them. Factions developed in some places between those who accepted Christianity (in whatever form)

and those who chose to maintain their pre-Contact religion as best they could. Others combined elements of several traditional religions with those introduced by Christian missionaries into entirely new religions (the Native American church is one example of this phenomenon; the Ghost Dance movement, which ended with the slaughter of Lakotas at Wounded Knee, was another).

Nevertheless, Christian Indians persist, in all denominations. Some of these people see themselves as Christians first and foremost, and accept not only mainline religious doctrines but the social and materialistic doctrines of capitalism that have been criticized by those working for social justice. They are, in essence, the 'true converts', accepting not only the introduced religion, but the Biblical hermenutics used justify the conquest of the Americas and the oppression of its people.

Other indigenous people, however, have challenged the Euro-American reading of the Bible that viewed the Native inhabitants as the Cannanites occupying the Promised Land, fated to either extermination or perpetual servitude. These people, while embracing a Christology that emphasizes Jesus' teachings regarding the poor and oppressed, also reject the automatic gainsaying of all pre-Christian beliefs and practices. In these congregations, one does not have to emulate Europeans in order to be a Christian, nor should anyone be ashamed of their 'pagan' ancestors. Instead, they celebrate and accept both the tenants of Christianity and the religion of their forebearers (Treat 1996: 10).

### **How I Fit In**

The Narragansett Indian Church Meetinghouse is a small, unassuming building set

roughly a mile off of Rt. 2 in Charlestown, Rhode Island. It was one of the first churches in the town of Charlestown, originally dating back to the First Great Awakening in the mid-1700's. The current structure was built first in 1859, and then more or less rebuilt over a period of time from 1993 to the present after an arsonist's fire left only the granite walls standing. On a typical Sunday from Easter until Thanksgiving, a small group of parishioners (between six and fifteen), most over 60 years of age, meet to worship in the one-room stone structure.

This building has been an important part of my life since I was a few weeks old. I am a member of the Narragansett Indian Tribe, and my mother's family is what Narragansetts call a 'traditional' family. They have lived, hunted, fished and trapped on land in Charlestown and South Kingstown for as long as anyone can remember. My grandmother was very active in the Church for years, serving as Church Board president for many years. As a child, I attended Sunday School, learned to sing the names of the Twelve Disciples, put out the song books and Bibles, fetched water from the spring at the bottom of the hill, and gathered kindling for starting the fire in cool weather. My cousin and I would occasionally find a tiny black snake that had crawled into the building through the cracks in the floorboards (snakes so small that they were occasionally trapped in spider webs), and learned to avoid the wasps and hornets that built their nests in the same locations every year. We also learned to go to the bathroom before we left our house or else risk having to use the uncomfortable and decrepit outhouse. In June, we ran out into the field in front of the Church to hunt for wild strawberries, and in July we picked blueberries and huckleberries in the surrounding woods and swamp. Once in a while we would have an evening service by lamplight because the Church did not have

electricity.

I learned my first Bible stories in that Church, but I also learned some of the most important lessons about my Narragansett ancestors there as well. History and fate had played some interesting tricks on the Narragansetts: the Tribe had suffered under colonial rule, converted to Christianity, intermarried with non-Indians, and was dispossessed by the state of Rhode Island. The tribe had then been ignored by the Federal government, which barely knew the Tribe existed and furthermore did not particularly care. But I saw the people from the other traditional families come to Church, especially on the second Sunday in August when everyone gathered for the annual August Meeting. My relatives sat and talked with the other Tribal members, laughing and reminiscing about the old days when the 'old Indians' would get together, eat, drink, fight and make up. I learned how to do the traditional dances in the pow-wow circle, walked to the site where the Tribe's children first learned how to read and write in the 1760's, and listened to the wind blow through the Crying Rocks where unwanted infants had once been exposed and left to die.

My first lesson in Narragansett resistance came when I was told that the reason why the pulpit was placed between the church doors. In the old days, my grandmother told me, the Indians were only allowed to meet except in the Church. In order to gather together to discuss tribal matters, they would have to act as if they were conducting a church service. But the placement of the pews meant that they could see anyone coming into a meeting, and that no outsiders could enter the Church without being seen. Later, I would learn of the many other tactics used by the tribe to maintain itself against the larger society, but this reminder of persecution struck me each time I walked into Church, a

reminder literally set in stone<sup>1</sup>.

I was born on the cusp of a change in Federal Indian policy, which stated that the Federal government had a responsibility to all Indian people, not only those who had treaties.

Mine was the first generation that benefited from the change in policy, and I continued to learn other things through the Tribe's Federally-funded education program: some of the language, many of the subsistence practices, and a fair amount of traditional crafts

(although I was never very good at them). When I was thirteen, the Tribe was Acknowledged as a sovereign nation, and I became a 'real' Indian, certified by the United States government.

When I chose to attend a college with a strong Native American Studies department, I met many other Native students who had grown up in Christian churches like myself, but who were either indifferent or hostile to them. Courses in Native American studies emphasized the destructive role of Christianity in Native societies. Little mention was made of any positive role churches might play in the lives of Indian people, and often when church-based initiatives were discussed, the non-Indian clergy were generally the focus of the discussion. What was also missing was any mention of the role Native churches played in maintaining tribal identity. Unlike other ethnic communities in the United States, where churches were credited for their role in community cohesion, churches in Native communities were seen as divisive, separating traditionalists from Christians and causing schisms within tribal bodies.

When considering my own history and experiences with my little church back in the woods, I decided that I wanted to understand why my community had a self-administered church that prided itself as being "traditional". Why did the church become

the locus of maintaining traditional symbols, including political authority? Which symbols had been retained, and why those rather than others? How had those symbols and rituals come into existence in the first place, and what role did the state (not just the state of Rhode Island, but the local authorities and the Federal government) play in shaping what the Narragansetts chose to preserve and what they chose to abandon? And what does this one tribe's experience have to say about the nature of Christianity in Native American communities, especially those east of the Mississippi?

### **The Myth of "Tradition"**

It is a very grave mistake to try and make the past uncomplicated. History is a highly contested arena, no matter whose past is being discussed. When two very different societies come into contact with each other and one side does almost all of the formal construction of the history of that conflict, the waters become murkier; when divergent opinions from that same side fight it out for the privilege of becoming canonical, the whole endeavor is thrown into disarray. Although it may be true that events occur only once, they are viewed in many different ways by the participants: their personal biases, their misunderstanding of what was said versus what was actually meant, deliberate exclusion of materials the victor's would rather not have publicized- all of these things result in many different versions of history. Further, history reflects the power relationships between various parties, and most Native Americans have been on the losing end of power relations since 1492.

In writing this dissertation, one of the stumbling blocks I kept falling over was my

own defensiveness over how “traditional” the Narragansetts were (and are). One of the core issues of Narragansett identity has to do with the maintenance of tradition. From First Contact until the present day, so says the oral tradition I grew up with, the Narragansetts preserved the traditions of the pre-Contact Narragansetts through song, story and dance. Non-Indian historians or researchers who said otherwise were either conspiring to deny Narragansetts their true history or wanted to prove that the Narragansetts were not really Indians at all, but were at best Black people with a trace of Native ancestry.

Contemporary Native Americans are alternately limited and fortified by notions of what a ‘real’ Indian is. Robert Berkhofer’s seminal *The White Man’s Indian* (1978) explores the history of the creation of the “Indian” in the minds of first Europeans and then Euro-Americans. Indians have alternately (or simultaneously) been depicted as noble savages, bloodthirsty marauders, wretched drunks and slatterns, ‘vanishing races’ on the verge of physical and/or cultural disappearance, and primitive environmentalists. All of these evaluations have depended on how the changing fortunes of America needed or wanted to see its original inhabitants. Philip Deloria’s *Playing Indian* (1998) goes one step further and examines the many ways in which acting out “Indianness” (through the donning of costumes, joining organizations like the Boy Scouts, and participation in ceremonies) has meant different things to different generations of non-Native Americans, particularly White Americans. He even makes the point that White Americans in the ‘hobbyist’ movement of the post-WWII era considered Indian masquerade their own property, and were highly critical of African-Americans or Puerto Ricans who sought to participate in such activities, and even lamented the participation of genuine Indians who

were not 'authentic' enough (Deloria 1998:146,151). All of these ideas and images were underscored by the developing concept(s) of race in the United States, which varied not only across time but space as well --for example, 19th century Euro-Americans living East of the Mississippi were highly critical of the treatment of Indians West of the Mississippi, but only after most of the tribes in the East had been either removed West and those remaining were no longer a threat.

While White Americans were redefining what it meant to be "Indian" every other generation, Native people themselves reacted to the views held by those in the dominant society. Many cooperated with the Federal government in order to secure benefits such as payment for performances, legal assistance in land claims issues, and access to higher education. Unwittingly dragged into the developing racial hierarchy of the United States, the development of the 'blood quantum' system originated as a sort of compromise between tribes and the Federal government to assure that children of Indian/non-Indian marriages would still have some rights guaranteed to Indians. This compromise would eventually result in conflicts between those of greater and lesser degrees of 'blood' (founded, of course, on the essentialist notion of racial identity being rooted in the actual blood of an individual). Additionally, the racial ideas of the dominant society meant that the children of African/Indian unions faced more discrimination than those of Anglo/Indian unions (for example, certain Federal boarding schools such as Carlisle would not accept children of Indian and African descent).

Ideological and economic factors affecting the dominant society affect attitudes that have then been reflected in Federal policies related to Indians, and this does not even take into account the myriad of local and state policies that affected and continue to affect