

RHODE ISLAND HISTORY



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1669

To y^r hon^{rs} Gov^t & Councell at Newport & on Rhode Island
 y^r hum^{ble} Remonstrance & Petition of the Town of Providence
 humbly sheweth
 That having bene informed y^t Mr Harris (notwithstanding y^e Car-
 penter's office) y^e prestur'd to pursue his Charge of a Riot
 agst so many of our honest & innocent Neigh^{bs}. We thought
 it our dutie (being orderly met according to Law) for y^e hon^{our}
 of Truth y^e honor of his M^{ty} & y^e Grace of his M^{ty} Loyal
 & gratefull subjects (now most unjustly & violently oppress'd) to
 present this free lib^{ty} to y^r prudent Consideration: first as to
 y^e Accusers: 2^d as to y^e Accusation & y^e Accus'd.

First as to y^e Accusers first all of them joyntly wth Carpenter, wth
 & Tho: Harris, they greaten his M^{ty} name & service, but
 it is but a mantle or Cloake to private Ends: For there are
 many Evidences, some which since given in to y^r honrd Assst
 of this Colony of thire treacherous profession (as for justly
 suspect practices) of thire treacherous mind agst his M^{ty}
 great joynt. Chactre & Authority in this Colony, & y^e Gov^{rn}
 & Liberties of it fall wth Evidences you may please to
 Command y^r sight of

1. rememb^r y^t it is about 24 years since he was disfranchis'd
 & cast out from y^e Assembly of his Neigh^{bs} in Town meeting for
 assaulting a Neigh^{bd} & bloodshedding in y^e Kings high way in y^e
 streets & for a furious maintayning of such a practice: Tir-
 tuous he hath thrust himselfe oft into our Meetings (though
 some have resist agst it) & some did in our last years troubles
 out y^e truth y^e he intruded & vsue pro, for he was never
 orderly r^escav'd in againe, since his disfranchisement wth Record

2^d. Since y^t time he hath lived in y^e Woods until y^e year 1656 or there
 about (as some of his friends have often sayd) like a vobore
 Nebuch^{sd}nezar, not fit for y^e Societies of men: where
 wth others spent themselves to uphold Town & Colony by means
 of a Mare got for a Widow y^e Towns gave him, he got some horse
 & he lay bawking at & biting (as he cou'd) both Town & Colony:
 But in y^e year aforesayd, he broke forth with an open flag of
 Defiance, under his hand writing to y^e fower Towns of y^e Colony
 agst all Civill Gov^{rn} as if saying y^t it would shortly be y^e gro
 y^e should cry out No Lords, No Masters saying y^t y^e house
 of Saul was weakne & weakne (wth he all along in his booke
 mixt up to be Civill Gov^{rn} & Gov^{rn}ments) & y^e house of David
 (y^t is Mr Harris & his Samis) stronger & stronger, this booke is yet extant
 & tearfully vomits out his filth agst all Gov^{rn} & Gov^{rn}ors
 of what Rankes so ever, all Lords & Masters, agst all Lawes, & Law
 making Assemblies, agst all Courts, all Punishment, Wisdom, Justice
 & Record as Thieves, Robbers, Hy societies, Satyr Ombe (Courts of Devils) Dea-
 mons & Devils, & Soules (Spirits of Devils) what was y^e Proceedings

PROVIDENCE
 0174
 TOWN PAPERS

Roger Williams attacks his rival William Harris in this Remonstrance and Petition of the Town of Providence to the Governor and Council at Newport, 31 August 1668. Such confrontations brought out Williams's vituperative nature.

The Worlds of Roger Williams

by Sydney V. James*

I desire not to sleep in security and dream of a nest which no hand can reach, I cannot but expect changes, and the change of the last enemy, Death. Yet dare I not despise a liberty which the Lord seemeth to offer to me, if for mine own and others' peace.¹

It is time to recapture some appreciation of the complexity of Roger Williams's existence. A simple approach may serve to make a start — an attempt to distinguish the worlds in which he spent his days, to untwist the strands that made up the rope of his life.

The effort is worthwhile because his career has been simplified too much and has been treated too freely to make it the vehicle for a message. His thoughts have been analyzed as having a changeless consistency. He has been honored as the hero of a cause or quality that made him stand alone against his contemporaries — as the champion of soul liberty, the pioneer of separating state from church or church from state, as a paragon of individualism, or a friend of Indians. Sometimes his career has been narrated to bring out only those episodes or opinions that yield simple conclusions. Williams inevitably sounds rather like a crank. He probably had a touch of that quality, but he had no obsessive personality or monomania, no compulsion to set himself constantly against the rest of mankind.

The distorted portrayals cannot be completely corrected. Only fantasy or clairvoyance can pretend to conjure up the "real" Roger Williams. With so many allusions to now lost documents, the surviving evidence warns against offering

more than a rough sketch with many parts left vague. For instance, Williams's political theories, which — to judge from his actions — surely developed during the decades of dealings with authority, exist only in fragments or in remarks tangential to other subjects. No more than a handful of his business transactions can be discovered in the extant letters. And there are no details — gamey or otherwise — of his sexual behavior. Psychohistorians, perhaps fortunately, face rough sledding.

Still, some qualities of Williams's life are fairly clear in the surviving evidence. Read in a straightforward fashion, his letters reveal a man who lived simultaneously in worlds that often remained distinct. Even his framework of thought could change almost completely when he turned from one subject to another, as from fortunes of the Puritan movement as a whole to public affairs of the town of Providence. His views kept developing in the light of experience, most obviously perhaps with regard to Indians. He shifted easily between mentalities appropriate to his main occupations: small-scale trader, public leader, and preacher. Those who describe him as a paragon of intellectual consistency, a man driven as few ever have been by the implications of his ideas, must leave a great deal out of the reckoning.

Williams lived in at least six distinct, though sometimes overlapping, worlds of public life. These were the worlds of the higher ranks in English society, the Puritan movement, the English settlement of New England, the Narragansett Indians, the colony of Rhode Island, and the town of Providence. During the seventeenth

*Professor of history at University of Iowa, Sydney James is author of *Colonial Rhode Island* (1975).

century, each was a stage for exciting events. A man acting on all six necessarily pursued the scripts of so many different dramas.

Williams also had several kinds of private relationships to other people. These included his family ties, his network of friends, and his pastoral duties in a church during the short time he had one. Little can be said of these relationships. His two years as a pastor — as distinguished from a preacher, which he was much of his adult life — have produced only evidence about his disagreements with Massachusetts authorities. Devoted parishioners in Salem stood behind him for a while in his insistence on congregational autonomy, freedom from secular interference, and separation from the Church of England; several of them followed him to Providence. This information, however, is all that is known about his ministry and the internal character of the church under his care.

Disappearance of Williams's incoming letters has closed the door on examining most of his many friendships. Even his relations with the John Winthrops, senior and junior, are impossible to understand because only his letters to them remain. Williams's words to the elder Winthrop manifested either reciprocated personal regard or deference before high standing and power. Lacking any sample of the response, both possibilities remain open. Quite likely the younger Winthrop and his wife were intimate with Williams, but the intimacy had no basis of equality.

Within his own family, Williams probably was conventionally affectionate, responsible, and attentive, although he left very little evidence to lend substance to this impression. In a way now out of fashion, he expressed his fondness for his wife by writing a book telling her how to improve her spiritual life. He worried about the epilepsy of one of his sons. Information on these private relations, like Williams's financial affairs, exists in stray fragments that may only suggest accurate impressions.

For better or worse, the public stages, the larger realms in which Williams's career unfolded, must be explored without much knowledge of his private traits.

Our first glimpse into Williams's life reveals his place in English society and his ambitions. We see something surprisingly close to a social

climber. His earliest surviving words are in letters written in 1629 to Lady Joan Barrington. In a web of kinship connecting the Puritan gentry and aristocracy, Lady Barrington was, among other things, Oliver Cromwell's aunt. Williams, by contrast, had been born into the lower or middling ranks of commercial London. Partly through the favor of Lord Edward Coke, he had obtained a university education and with it something close to the rank of gentleman. Williams had entered the ministry and later became family chaplain to one of Lady Barrington's relatives and neighbors. He mingled freely in the company of the upper class so long as he remembered that he was not truly a member and behaved in ways suitable to his calling.

As a result of this mingling, Williams developed an affection for Lady Barrington's niece, Jane Whalley, and asked the aunt to approve his courtship. In a very deferential letter, he delicately acknowledged "some indecorum for her [niece] to condescend to my low ebb." But he politely pointed out that Jane Whalley's meager financial prospects equalled his own and he emphasized his devotion to the ministry, a vocation that made the match barely thinkable.² The marriage would have moved him into the circles of the gentry, and Lady Barrington would have none of it. She even forbade him further admission to her house.

Williams responded with an abrupt shift away from conventional deference. He assumed the role of pastor with a vengeance. Where formerly he had compared Lady Barrington to the biblical Sarah and the stars in the sky, he suddenly accused her of worldliness and disdain for the pious, especially ministers. "Certainly, Madame," he wrote, "the Lord hath a quarrel against you." He called on her to repent and reform without delay. "Remember, I beseech you, your candle is twinkling and glass near run. The Lord only knows how few minutes are left behind."³

He recovered and contented himself with a suitable wife, a clergyman's daughter of respectable standing but no social eminence. The marriage brought some improvement in Williams's social position. He could enter upper class society but could not obtain membership.

This episode might be dismissed as a burst of youthful optimism touched off by romance, which met frustration. Yet in 1652 he tried again



Barrington Hall, at Hatfield Broad Oak in Essex?

Barrington Hall, Essex, England.

RIHS Library

to raise himself on the English social scale. The incident resembled the familiar story of the Englishman who went to the colonies to make his fortune and then returned home to claim high rank, except Williams had neither grown rich nor planned to stay in England. He had another frustrating exchange of letters with a high-ranking lady, this time Lord Coke's daughter, Anne Sadleir, by whom he wished to be regarded as a brother.

Williams's grounds are revealing. Her father, he claimed, had referred to him as a son. He also presented his piety and devotion to "the ministry of Christ and the soul freedom of the people." But he had stronger claims than these. He was a man of high responsibilities on an official mission from an American colony. He was a published author — he sent her a copy of his latest book. He was a hero of English colonial expansion. "It hath pleased the Most High," he wrote, "to carry me on eagles' wings through mighty labors, mighty sufferings, and to vouchsafe to use so base an instrument (as I humbly hope) to glorify

himself [in] many of my trials and sufferings, both amongst the English and barb[arians]." As a result of his endeavors in religion and government, he had the confidence of powerful men in England, including Sir Henry Vane and Oliver Cromwell himself.⁴

Williams had a strong case, but it failed to impress Mrs. Sadleir, who was a passionate royalist and militant devotee of the non-Puritan wing of the Church of England. An exchange of letters followed in which she tried politely at first to dismiss him, while privately saying he should hang at Tyburn.⁵ Again assuming his pastoral voice Williams told her what to read so that she would adopt his religious opinions.⁶ Finally she turned on him in an angry letter matching his erudition with her own, and the episode came to a close.⁷ For some reason, she saved his letters and the drafts of her replies.

Williams had some consolation for Mrs. Sadleir's treatment. Sir Henry Vane and his lady invited him to their country seat in Lincolnshire for an extended visit. This visit was his last

known venture into the English upper class. After his return to America in 1654, he held a high position for a few years, but then largely withdrew from official duties and became increasingly a local figure.

Throughout his life, he regarded himself as a partisan — even a leader — of the Puritan cause and watched its fortunes closely. This aspect of his life had two or three parts. The familiar one is his determination to purify Puritanism, a zeal that resulted in his banishment from Massachusetts and easy entry into radical religious circles and offices of the mighty in England during the Puritan Revolution and the Protectorate. Scholars have written at length about this aspect of Williams's life and it needs no further comment. Only one point requires emphasis: he saw his disagreements with Massachusetts authorities and others as strictly family quarrels. He even hoped for something of a reconciliation when he wrote a book against Quakerism and sought to follow the book's success in Massachusetts by publishing some sermons.⁸

The Puritan cause held Williams's loyalties and intellectual interest throughout his life. When the Long Parliament began its work in 1640, opening the door to success for reform, he — like John Winthrop and many others in America — eagerly grasped at every bit of news from the mother country. Williams interpreted the upheaval between 1640 and 1660 in light of traditional concepts of Christian history, making a few adjustments to emphasize the New England experiment's importance in showing the way and also to offer his brand of Puritanism as the ultimate goal. He expressed his point of view in this exclamation on the stabilization of Cromwell's regime in 1652:

Praised be the Lord, we are preserved, the nation is preserved. The Parliament sits. God's people are secure — too secure. A great opinion is that the kingdom of Christ is risen and (Revel. 11) the kingdoms of the earth are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.

Cautiously, he added, "others have fear of the slaughter of the witnesses yet approaching."⁹

Back in Providence he received letters from his friends in England conveying news that he exchanged with John Winthrop, Jr. Williams had reports of the tottering of the Protectorate and the

impending slaughter of witnesses when the Restoration approached — a time, as he understood it, to fear for the whole Protestant cause. The Pope had brought peace among his nations, except Portugal, while the Protestant countries warred among themselves. "The common enemy, the Romish wolf," he wrote, "is very high in resolution and hope and advantage to make a prey on all, of all sorts, that desire to fear God." He concluded that God had passed "an irrevocable sentence of amputations and cauterizations upon the poor Protestant party."¹⁰

In his last surviving letter, written shortly after political turmoil touched off by the Popish Plot allegations, Williams was still trying to fit the pattern of events into a grand design. "We have tidings here," he wrote, "of Shaftesbury's and Howard's beheading; and contrarily, their release, London's manifestations of joy, and the king's calling a Parliament." The contradictions could not be resolved in Providence. He finally turned away, saying, "But all these are but sublunaries, temporaries, and trivials. Eternity, O eternity, is our business."¹¹

Related to his lifelong commitment to the Puritan cause was Williams's dedication to the English colonization of America. Here again an element in his outlook seemed at odds with his well known zeal for creating a refuge for victims of religious persecution. Both sides of his thinking were real, however.

Diplomacy with Indians in southern New England became the most famous manifestation of his devotion to general English advancement. Although he included Providence and Rhode Island interests in these negotiations, from the start he sought advantage and safety for all English settlers. This sense of solidarity with the rest he explained in 1638. To John Winthrop he pleaded that God's "wisdom and pity be pleased to help you all, . . . to remember that we all are rejected of our native soil, and more to mind the many strong bonds with which we are all tied than any particular distaste each against other."¹² The unifying ingredient for Williams was the Puritan movement.

Several years later he carried this thought to astonishing lengths. As president of the colony he had helped to keep independent from Massachusetts, he professed to officials in Boston a desire

for a comprehensive government in New England. This goal had been latent, perhaps, in his collaboration with the Winthrops but it became overt in 1655: "I cordially profess it before the most high, that I believe, if . . . ourselves and all the whole country by joint consent were subject to your government," he wrote, "it might be a rich mercy."¹³ At other times, before and after this occasion, he explored the possibility of bringing John Winthrop, Jr. into power as governor over Rhode Island and some territorial combination.

Williams gave up such projects in the later 1650s after the orthodox Puritan colonies resumed religious persecution of Quakers and Baptists. Preserving an autonomous Rhode Island again claimed his constant devotion. Late in life he defended the heterodox colony as one where he could bear witness against the churches and ministries of the neighboring jurisdictions. These institutions, he said, were "but state policies and a mixture of golden images unto which" the magistrates, "were [their] . . . carnal sword so long, . . . would musically persuade or by fiery torments compel to bow down as many as that great type of inventors and persecutors Nebuchadnezzar did."¹⁴ Thus he resumed his earlier conception of his purpose to maintain a religious refuge in New England.

Similarly, Williams's attitudes toward his Indian neighbors fluctuated, probably as a result of his experiences, but in ways that were sometimes indirect. Very little information survives concerning his commercial dealings of long duration with the Wampanoags and the Narragansetts. Record of his diplomatic endeavors and his evaluations of the natives are complicated by his propensity to romanticize danger and squalor he encountered, his tendency to make contradictory comments, and probably his reluctance to express himself candidly on some points.

When he undertook diplomatic missions for the English colonists at large, he reported to John Winthrop or whoever was governor of Massachusetts. Mostly, his tone was matter-of-fact, his judgments cautious. Williams, at first, had no high opinion of the senior chief sachem of the Narragansetts, Canonicus, whom he described in English as "very sour" and in Latin as a fretful and rude old man.

He never wholly reversed this opinion. At least he enjoyed a better relationship with the old potentate's junior partner and nephew, Miantonomi.¹⁵ In spite of his opinion of Canonicus, Williams usually took the Narragansett side in controversies among the Indians of southern New England.¹⁶

He displayed a touch of credulity when he heard of a potential alliance between the Pequots and the Mohawks. Believing Mohawk meant "man-eaters in their language," he imagined a horrifying possibility. "I sadly fear," he wrote, that "if the Lord please to let loose these mad dogs, their practice will render the Pequots cannibals, too."¹⁷

Hoping to convert them to Christianity, perhaps Williams wanted to think the Indians were malleable in their ways. After less than a year of what he reported only as diplomatic missions among them, he wrote John Winthrop that he saw "many a poor Indian soul inquiring after God," announcing that "I have convinced hundreds at home and abroad that in point of religion they are all wandering."¹⁸

Winthrop accused him of taking the Narragansetts' side in all controversies and believing whatever they told him. Probably offended, Williams replied, "I am not yet turned Indian," and he began what later became a frequent practice of emphasizing natives' ways that he abhorred to offset what he said for them. He called them "proud and angry and covetous and filthy, hating and hateful," modifying the indictment by adding, "as we ourselves have been till kindness from heaven pitied us."¹⁹

Within a dozen years Williams reversed himself on the value of bringing Christianity to the Indians but not on their uglier traits. By 1649 he became convinced that the introduction of civilized ways would have to precede the Gospel and he declared that it would be unfit to regard any Indians as English subjects until they renounced barbarism for what he called civility.²⁰

He polarized these two conditions of humanity emphatically during the 1640s and 1650s. Conceding some important virtues to the Indians he knew — though none to their enemies — he made surprisingly sweeping statements, such as, "All Indians are extremely treacherous," and called the Mohegans "the dregs of mankind."

Land I had of him. I gave him and his youngest son
 Miantonomi gifts of 2 sorts, first former presents from
 Plymouth & Salem, 2, I was here their counseller and Secretary
 in all their Wars with Pequots, Mohegans, Long Islanders, Wampanoags
 - nowy, they had my Person my Shallop & Pinnace & hired servants &c
 at command and on all occasions, Transporting 50 at a time & lodging
 50 at a time at my house I never denied them ought that they Law-
 fully desired of me, Canonicus laid me out ground for a
 Trading house at Narragansett with his own hand, but he never
 traded with me but had freely what he desired, Goods, Money so that 'tis
 simple to imagine that many hundreds, excused me to the last of the
 man's breath who dying sent for me and desired to be buried in my
 cloth of free gift and so he was my Trading house which follow

From a contemporary copy of Williams's letter listing his gifts to Miantonomi.

RIHS Library

Another group he described as "barbarous scum and offscouring of mankind." He spotted particular evils and on occasion summed up the situation by saying, "Barbarians are barbarians."²¹

These comments probably voiced not only Williams's actual appraisal but also frustration in his efforts to negotiate harmony in southern New England. Narragansetts, Niantics, Mohegans, and the governments of Connecticut and Massachusetts, kept wrangling among themselves, occasionally with tragic results. Nothing could persuade Massachusetts that the Narragansetts were behaving honorably, nothing could restrain Ninigret of the Niantics from adventures that stirred up trouble in various directions. Probably, Williams felt used rather than useful.

A long statement he made in 1677 after the Narragansetts and their rival nations had been nearly destroyed in war suggests his frustrations. After all that had happened, Williams remembered himself neither as a wary diplomat serving English colonization, nor as a civilized man

patronizing barbarians, but as a tool of Canonicus. In a striking passage, Williams wrote:

I gave him and his youngest brother's son, Miantonomi, gifts of two sorts: First, former presents from Plymouth and Salem [that is, before Williams's move to Providence]; Two, I was here their counselor and secretary in all their wars with the Pequots, Mohegans, Long Islanders, Wampanoags. They had my person, my shallop and pinnace, and hired servant, etc., at command on all occasions, transporting fifty at a time, and lodging fifty at a time at my house. I never denied them aught lawfully they desired of me. Canonicus laid me out ground for a trading house at Narragansett with his own hand, but he never traded with me, but had freely what he desired — goods, money — and so that 'tis simple to imagine that many hundreds [value in pounds sterling?] excused me to the last of that man's breath, whom, dying, sent for me and desired to be buried in my cloth of free gift. And so he was.²²

These disclosures appear in a letter written long after the fact and for the purpose of asserting Williams's views on how he obtained land from the Narragansett sachems by gift rather than purchase. Still, the letter has the ring of truth — or perhaps, half-truth. Williams no longer felt constrained to depict himself as masterful in his dealings with the sachems and admitted how much he had to do for them. He failed to include in the reckoning a reasonable appraisal of what they had done for him by giving land and keeping the peace that allowed Rhode Island towns to grow in the shadow of more powerful neighbors. Presenting himself as put upon more than can be justified by the record, he may be excused in light of his advancing years, the frightful losses in King Philip's War, and his embittered controversy with William Harris.

The Roger Williams who was a leader in the colony of Rhode Island needs little explanation. Several of his achievements are well known, such as his procuring the first charter and helping to obtain its reconfirmation against a patent making William Coddington governor for life on Aquidneck. In these endeavors Williams acted as an emissary for the colony in London.

At home, Williams's principal role in the colony's public business was as president in the years following 1654. He became president at a trying time when the colony had just been mostly reunited.

Coddington's patent shattered Rhode Island leaving three different governments asserting authority, two on the island and one on the mainland. To complicate matters, a number of English and Indians between the centers of Providence and Warwick earlier had joined with Massachusetts. Putting the pieces back together again required the work of many hands and Williams did more than his share. Before he returned from England, he persuaded Sir Henry Vane to send an appeal for unity.²³ Unrecorded bargaining, deliberation, and soul-searching led to a restoration of a single government under the first charter. Williams took office as its president.

There remained hard feelings, particularly on Coddington's part. Just how these were placated was not recorded — no doubt on purpose. Williams probably used his talent as peacemaker and accomplished much to soothe antagonisms.

His public responsibilities included dealing with the Massachusetts adherents. The frustrating, often comic and ironic story has been already well told. Williams by dignified arguments did little or nothing to persuade the officials in Boston to abandon their citizens south of the border. Reasoning gave way to confusion when scuffling and shouting began over which colony was to capture, hold prisoner, and try a sometime Pawtuxet resident named Richard Chasmore, accused of various crimes. Providence men carried the day by rescuing Chasmore from Massachusetts officials who boldly passed through town. The miscreant was held for trial under Rhode Island jurisdiction. Williams probably suffered, and rightly so, as a consequence of his demands that his neighbors turn Chasmore over to the invading officers. He surely lost prestige by failing to impose his policy, formulated with hopes of a New England unification under the Massachusetts government.²⁴ After this fracas he left high office and went back to informal methods for encouraging cooperation for the public good, most often within his own town. That he had a genuine gift for appealing to people's consciences cannot be denied.

Roger Williams as leading citizen of Providence presents a distinctive cluster of traits, preoccupations, and ideas about his place in the world. In the early years he devoted much thought to the rudiments of life — where to build his house, whom to welcome as neighbors, how to make a living, how to organize the nascent community at Providence. It is impossible to follow his steps precisely. What he wrote to John Winthrop about the problems he perceived in government and the ways he thought of solving them commonly appeared — if in modified form — in the town records. It appears as though he exerted leadership successfully on many occasions. Perhaps his most important objective was the policy of giving uniform land rights to all admitted as settlers of the town. To preserve this policy he had to allow special advantages to the first twelve men who joined him, thus creating the situation that caused his most protracted quarrel.

His brief service as religious leader, unfortunately, is known imperfectly. He wrote nothing about it that survives. The evidence is indirect at best, hearsay at worst. After departing from his

past to embrace adult baptism by dipping, he later believed that the ministerial office no longer had divine sanction. For years he groped spiritually for an understanding of what worship might be authorized by God. Eventually he decided that he might speak publicly as preacher, though not serve as pastor of a church.²⁵ Toward the end of his life he delivered sermons regularly to anyone who attended at Cocumscussoc.²⁶ Conceivably, he might have also preached in Providence, though there is no evidence to suggest that he did.

He never abandoned the sermonic tone to his neighbors. His first extant epistle advocated that townfolk submit disputes within the community and within the colony to impartial arbitrators.²⁷ His most famous letter on civil authority was a secular homily. To explain why religion and conscience should not be touched by the civil government, he compared the situation to that of a ship, where the captain needed authority for the good of all only over the actions of the crew and passengers, not their beliefs.²⁸

If Williams preached civic duty to his fellow citizens in Providence, he also expressed himself to them in four other modes — blunt, avuncular, kindly, and vituperative. Sometimes he addressed them in the simplest terms, as in these recommendations: "I pray the town to provide some easy way for the trying of small causes" and "that the fee appointed in this town to an attorney may be moderated."²⁹

The avuncular manner is illustrated by some advice to William Field, who had been in controversy with an Indian over the price of some land rights. After persuading the Indian to settle for a small sum, Williams wrote to Field, "Methinks I see a finger of the Most High in this providence. Formerly he demanded above £25 as I remember, [now] will rest with 25s. The wheel may turn again, and if this providence be neglected, there may not peace be had for many pounds."³⁰

His protective manner appeared frequently. On one occasion he asked the town meeting to exert a "fatherly care" over three women. The first, an adult, inclined toward matrimony with a young man of unsettled ways and cloudy background. Because both her father and mother had died, Williams wanted the town to assume the customary parental duty of inquiring into the

suitors' fitness and deciding whether to allow or forbid the marriage. The second was a widow with young children to raise, for whom the town should make sure that her husband's intentions for his family should be carried out. The third was a woman who had gone insane. Williams wrote to the town meeting: "My request is that you would be pleased to take what is left of hers into your own hands and appoint some to order it for her supply, and, if it may be, some public act of mercy to her necessities stand upon record amongst the merciful acts of a merciful town, that hath received many mercies from heaven and remembers that (we know not when) our wives may be widows and our children orphans, yea, and ourselves be deprived of all or most of our reason, before we go from hence, except mercy from the God of Mercies prevent it."³¹

The vituperative mode, along with some redeeming sides of Williams's character, came out in his long dispute with William Harris, a dispute that made Williams a leader of part of the town against the rest. The contest brought out Williams's ugliest sentiments — outrage at having his memory attacked and his importance denigrated, self-pity used for manipulative ends, and an intense hatred rendered more vivid by skill in using words. He probably twisted the truth to serve his passion, something he did on no other discernible occasion. Among the choice attacks on Harris, Williams wrote, "his tongue is as foul as his pen with constant and loathsome revilings of all that cross him," adding the snide assertion that since Harris had been disfranchised by the town of Providence, "he hath lived in the woods until the year 1656 or thereabouts and, as some of his friends have often said, like another Nebuchadnezzar, not fit for the society of men."³² Perhaps the best was Williams's description in 1679: "That prodigy of pride and scorning, W. Harris, who being an impudent morris dancer in Kent, under the cloak of scurrilous jests against the bishop got into a flight to New England, and under a cloak of separation got in with myself, till his self ends and restless strife and at last his atheistical denying of heaven and hell made honest souls to fly from him."³³

Paradoxically the long contest showed Williams at his best, as an unselfish champion of honesty in dealings with the Narragansetts, as a man

Mar: 22. 11. 50 (So called)

Well beloved friends: In respect to each of
 you presented with heartie desires of y^r
 present & eternall prae. I am sorry
 I am occasioned to trouble you in y^r midst
 of many y^r other Troubles. yet upon y^r expe-
 rience of y^r wanted Lo: kindness & gentle-
 nes toward All men & my selfe also I
 pray you heare me patiently. If I had been
 possid to have personally attended the Court
 & to have presented (my selfe) these few
 Requests following, but being much hamperd
 & broken with such Travells I am forced
 to present you in writing ^{these} Requests

PROVIDENCE

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TOWN PAPERS

The first & concerne others living & dead amongst us
 the 2th concerne my selfe. I first thin I pray be
 pleased to review y^r expositions betwix us &
 o^r dead friend John Smith, & since it hath pleased
 y^r God of all mercies to vouchsafe this Town & others
 such a mercie by his means: I beseech you studie
 how to put an End to y^t Controversie depending
 betwix us (as I may so speak) w^{ch} he. For true you
 have refused y^t Business to some of o^r Lo: Neighbors
 amongst you: But since there are some Obstruction
 I beseech you put forth yo^r wisdoms who know
 more waies to y^e wood than One: Ease y^r first of
 appoint others or some other Course, y^t y^r Grand
 clamour not from his yeare agst us, but y^t y^r Coun-
 try about us may say y^t Providence is not only
 a wise but a gratefull people to y^r God of Mercies
 & all his Instrum^t of mercie toward us.

ardent to provide a refuge for victims of religious persecution, and as a political preacher of self-restraint and contentment with sufficiency. It is hard to avoid drawing from this nasty wrangle a respect for the man's sense of civic responsibility and his willingness to get into a dirty fight instead of retreating into the purity of extremist principles that would have isolated him from his community.

What is the meaning of the diversity within Roger Williams's life? His many worlds illustrate the flimsiness of the common notion of an older, simpler America — a notion that casts a bland golden glow on the past. Surely there have been pockets of bucolic isolation in America, but Roger Williams did not live in one. It is hardly possible to imagine a life — especially the life of a man residing in a town of a few hundred souls — acted out on more diverse stages; where events of cosmic dimensions occupied his thoughts on one stage, only to be quickly supplanted on another by the smallest details of neighborliness. To make his life a logical consistency under these conditions was all but impossible.

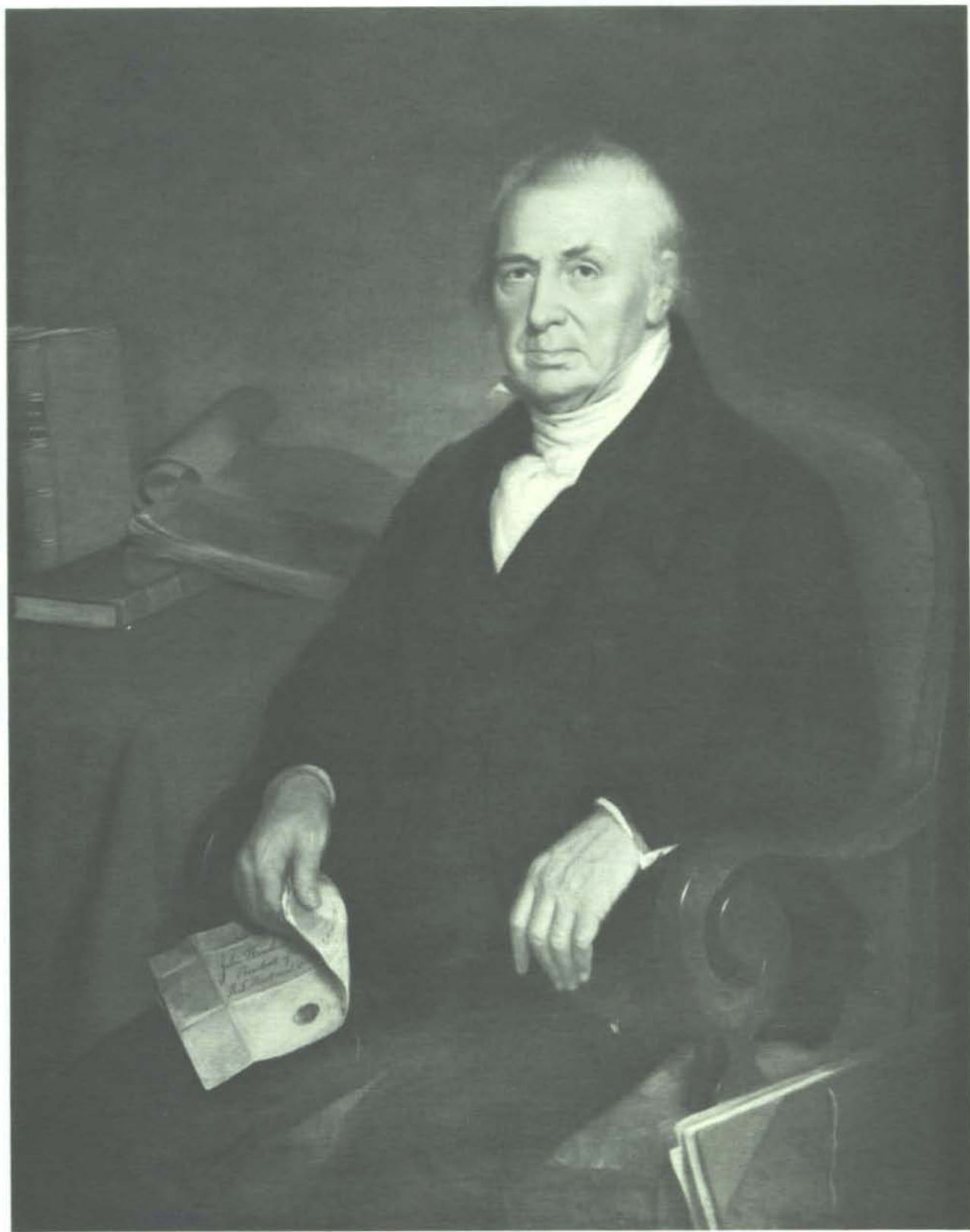
Williams did not have an extraordinary variety of elements in his life. He probably did have a few more matters to keep track of than his neighbors, and he dramatized the elements of his life by moving physically from stage to stage more often than others did. In seventeenth-century America, most adults had a profusion of concerns, if only because of the need for many skills in a nearly self-sufficient mode of living and the challenge of creating communities rather than inheriting them. Most men had to think of English neighbors, Indians, governments, prices in distant markets, politics in England, and the possibility of war — all of which inescapably affected their lives, even if they had no special religious causes to complicate their thoughts. Williams was a seventeenth-century American on a grand scale, not an oddity.

To find such a figure in the little town of Providence might seem improbable on first reflection, only because such eminent persons are rare everywhere. A glance at some of Williams's neighbors reveals a surprising number similarly caught up in the turbulence of the times. Williams's brother Robert remains a shadowy man, yet surviving evidence about him hints

strongly at thoughts churned up by religious radicalism during the Puritan Revolution. And there was Gregory Dexter, the London printer who emigrated when Williams returned from his first mission to the imperial capital. Dexter had been in the midst of the spiritual ferment and probably cast his lot in Providence as a place of like-minded persons. Or consideration might be given to John Throckmorton who wandered in trade and religion; the minister Thomas James who stayed only briefly; the mysterious Edward Cope; or Richard Scott, who married a sister of Anne Hutchinson and became the town's first well-known Quaker. Nearly any individual in early Providence about whom information can be found lived a storm-tossed life on both sides of the Atlantic, often in two or more communities in the American colonies, and often in shifting relation to the flows and eddies of the Puritan movement.

Actually Roger Williams was like his neighbors in many ways, exemplifying their characteristics in a greater degree. He was more active than they in the religious developments of his day, more persistent and rigorous in pursuing ideas, more widely traveled, more honored or at least more observed in his community and colony, more burdened with public responsibilities, more attentive to the grand events in Europe, better able to gain influence in England, slower to reconcile himself to being an obscure American, and far more gifted at articulating his thoughts. He was not the serene gray giant that extends a granite benediction over Providence from Prospect Terrace, but an intense man, active on many stages during a long public life. He was sincere and even prophetic in the summer of 1636 when he wrote, "I desire not to sleep in security and dream of a nest which no hand can reach." For him, Providence was the point where six worlds met, much more a base for action than a refuge.

- 1 Roger Williams to John Winthrop, c. Aug. 1636, in John Russell Bartlett, ed., "Letters of Roger Williams, 1632-1682," *Publications of the Narragansett Club*, 6 v. (Providence, 1866-1874) 6: 6 (hereafter cited as NCP 6). Texts of this and the other letters quoted in this article have been modernized in spelling and punctuation, manuscript abbreviations have been expanded, and numerals have been spelled out where suitable. Citations are to published rather than manuscript texts.
The idea for this article came from reading the unpublished manuscript edition of Williams's letters edited by Bradford F. Swan, whose erudition I have used frequently. His labors were immensely valuable providing useful notes and convincing estimates of the dates of undated letters.
An earlier version of this article was presented as a lecture at the Rhode Island Historical Society on April 27, 1978.
- 2 RW to Lady Joan Barrington, c. Apr. 1629, *New-England Historical and Genealogical Register* 43 (July 1889): 316-318.
- 3 RW to Lady Barrington, 2 May 1629, *New-England Hist. and Gen. Reg.* 43: 318-320.
- 4 RW to Anne Sadleir, probably Apr. 1652, NCP 6: 237-240.
- 5 NCP 6: 253.
- 6 Sadleir to RW, n.d.; RW to Sadleir, probably summer 1652; Sadleir to RW, n.d.; RW to Sadleir, n.d., probably winter 1652/3; NCP 6: 240-249.
- 7 Sadleir to RW, n.d., NCP 6: 249-252.
- 8 RW to Winthrop, 24 Oct. 1636; RW to Thomas Hinckley, 4 July 1679; RW to Simon Bradstreet, 6 May 1682; NCP 6: 7-13, 396-398, 403-406.
- 9 RW to Gregory Dexter, 8 Sept. or 7 Oct. 1652, NCP 6: 236. Scriptural citation is to Rev. 11: 15. Note that the prophesying and the killing of the witnesses occurs before this verse in Rev. 11: 3-7.
- 10 RW to John Winthrop Jr., 6 Feb. 1659/60; RW to Winthrop Jr. 8 Sept. 1660; NCP 6: 307-308, 310-312.
- 11 RW to Bradstreet, 6 May 1682, NCP 6: 406.
- 12 RW to Winthrop, c. 14 June 1638, NCP 6: 105. Cf. RW to General Court of Massachusetts, n.d., probably Oct. 1651, NCP 6: 231.
- 13 RW to General Court of Massachusetts, 15 Nov. 1655, *Hutchinson Papers*, 2 v. (Boston, 1865), 1: 310.
- 14 RW to Hinckley, 4 July 1679, NCP 6: 396-397.
- 15 RW to Sir Henry Vane and Winthrop, c. 1 May 1637, NCP 6: 16-17.
- 16 E.g., RW to Winthrop, c. 9 Sept. 1637, NCP 6: 62-63.
- 17 RW to Winthrop, 3 July 1637, NCP 6: 14.
- 18 RW to Winthrop, 28 Feb. 1637/8, NCP 6: 88. Cf. RW to Winthrop, between July and Dec. 1632, NCP 6: 2.
- 19 RW to Winthrop, c. 14 June 1638, NCP 6: 101.
- 20 RW to Winthrop Jr., 25 Oct. 1649; RW to General Court of Massachusetts, 5 Oct. 1649; NCP 6: 186, 270-272, 275-276.
- 21 RW to General Court of Massachusetts, 5 Oct. 1654; RW to Winthrop Jr., 6 Feb. 1659/60; RW to Sir Robert Carr, 1 Mar. 1665/6; NCP 6: 276, 307, 321, 323.
- 22 RW to a Special Court of Commissioners, c. 17 Nov 1677, in Henry Martyn Dexter, ed., *Roger Williams's "Christenings make not Christians," 1645*, Rhode Island Historical Tracts, No. 14 (Providence, 1881), 57.
- 23 Vane to Inhabitants of the Colony of Rhode Island, 8 Feb. 1653/4, NCP 6: 257-258.
- 24 Bradford F. Swan, *The Case of Richard Chasmore alias Long Dick* (Providence, 1944).
- 25 Edmund S. Morgan, *Roger Williams, The Church and the State* (New York, 1967), 39-56.
- 26 RW to Bradstreet, 6 May 1682, NCP 6: 404.
- 27 RW to Town of Providence, 31 Aug. 1648, NCP 6: 149-151.
- 28 RW to Town of Providence, n.d., perhaps 1654, NCP 6: 278-279. Cf. RW to the Town of Providence, c. Aug. 1654; RW to Daniel Abbott, 15 Jan. 1681/2; NCP 6: 262-266, 401-403.
- 29 RW to Town of Providence, c. 1 Nov. 1655, *R.I.H.S. Publications*, N. S. (1900) 8: 161.
- 30 RW to William Field, 13 Sept. 1649, *R.I.H.S. Proceedings*, 1877-1878 (1878), 62-63.
- 31 RW to Town of Providence, 22 Jan. 1650/1, NCP 6: 207-209; Bradford F. Swan, "Roger Williams and The Insane," *Rhode Island History* 5 (July 1946) 65-67.
- 32 Remonstrance and petition of Town of Providence to Governor and Council of Rhode Island, 31 Aug. 1668, *Early Records of the Town of Providence*, 21 v. (Providence, 1892-1915) 15: 122. That this document was written by Williams is shown in *Early Records* 3: 129.
- 33 RW to Hinckley, 4 July 1679, NCP 6: 397-398.



Portrait of John Howland by James Sullivan Lincoln, 1848.

John Howland: Pioneer in the Free School Movement

by Francis X. Russo*

Occasionally an individual identifies himself so completely with an idea or movement that its goals are realized through the sheer force of his persistent will. Others many sympathize and even cooperate with such an individual, but the movement's success is the result of an ability to combine influences and organize popular sentiment, and of a driving energy that refuses to yield to obstacles created by economic, political, and social forces in the environment. John Howland epitomizes this class of individuals. The success of the free school movement in Rhode Island was his personal triumph.

Historians have never fully explored Howland's role in the free school movement.¹ Howland's personal account, recorded at the age of ninety, more than forty-seven years after the events took place, has been the major source of information.² This account, quoted in its entirety or freely paraphrased, has not been analyzed, interpreted, or expanded through an examination of other historical sources. Although the chronicle of Howland's part in the free school movement that past historians have accepted is entertaining, it is devoid of any examination of economic, political, and social issues involved in the struggle, of personal factors that influenced Howland in his leadership role, and of the emergent philosophy of life and education that guided him.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Rhode Island's schools were private ventures assisted and nurtured by the towns and supported by fees charged to those who attended them. Towns offered limited aid, from building and leasing schools to guaranteeing part of the

schoolmaster's salary. While local governments recognized an obligation to encourage schools and to provide some assistance, they assumed that primary responsibility for education of children rested with parents, families, and interested individuals. Echoing these sentiments, the colonial and later the state General Assembly limited its assistance to allowing lotteries to raise money for school buildings, to granting incorporation charters for institutions of learning, to providing a room in the Providence Colony House to be used for a library, and to exempting from taxation property used for educational purposes.³

By the end of the eighteenth century, most Rhode Island towns had provided necessary local aid to insure the operations of one or more fee-charging schools in their area, but town residents remained reluctant to broaden the base of local assistance and to establish tax-supported, free schools. In Providence, attempts toward this end were made in 1767 and 1791. The first effort was "rejected by the poorer sort of the people" of the town, and the second failed because the legislation lacked provision for a tax or appropriation necessary for support of the schools.⁴

Rhode Islanders' reluctance to establish tax-supported, free schools can be traced to deeply rooted economic, political, and social forces. During Rhode Island's first 150 years, its economy was adversely affected by Indian wars, intercolonial jealousies, and the Revolutionary War. Small farmers were victims of two major Indian uprisings and of attempts by Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Plymouth to seize their lands.⁵ The colony was desolated and Providence was

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burned in the Indian wars, while in the Revolutionary War the townspeople of Newport and other areas along the coast suffered occupation, destruction, and blockade by the British.⁶ At war's end, the state was left with a heavy tax burden, a large debt, and fewer residents, and its government fell under the control of paper money advocates who issued large quantities of worthless money.⁷ A large segment of Rhode Island's population, having experienced economic hardship throughout the years, developed a general attitude of resistance toward establishment of any public institutions — such as free schools — that would require an additional tax burden.

Rhode Island's political history was marked by the insistence of its founding fathers upon the separation of church and state. Moved by Roger Williams's insight that "man should look through organized government directly, to the author and ruler of his being — to God," early Rhode Islanders embraced a belief in the soul liberty of every individual — the germinal idea for the principle of liberty in its widest meaning. Rhode Islanders came to view soul liberty as extending beyond freedom of faith and worship to include freedom of thought and speech in every legitimate form. They believed that however great and magnificent the organization of the state may be, man was still greater. Individualism, manifested in local support of private efforts in public education, was further reflected in Rhode Island's political organization — a confederation of towns, each of which jealously guarded local rights and privileges against infringements by colonial, and later, state government.⁸ Rhode Island's towns viewed with suspicion suggestions of free school legislation that would require them to establish schools for state aid and, in turn, expand state control into an area that had always been reserved to each town's jurisdiction.

Three classes comprised Rhode Island's social structure: plantation owners and country merchants in towns along the west side of Narragansett Bay; artisans, shopkeepers, mechanics, and small manufacturers who also resided in towns along the bay; and small farmers of the interior and western part. Merchants and plantation owners possessed necessary means and enjoyed sufficient leisure to attain cultivation that would naturally result "from intercourse with each other

and with the best informed men of Rhode Island, and from the possession of private libraries, for that day, large and extensive." They sent their children to private schools, and they were unwilling to pay for the education of others. Artisans and shopkeepers became part of the emerging class of mechanics and small manufacturers during the 1750s. By the end of the century, as this group realized its potential for wealth, members "desired the further development of character:" and sought "the use of those [educational] means by which this desire might be gratified."⁹ They lacked sufficient wealth to afford private education and were too small a group to force the enactment of free school legislation.

Small farmers comprised the largest class and possessed the least wealth. They had "but few of the comforts and luxuries of life," and their "only opportunities of adding to their knowledge were their religious meetings, their town meetings, and the country courts." Deprived of education in their own childhood, and lacking means to correct their intellectual and cultural shortcomings, they regarded ignorance "as the badge of intellectual and spiritual freedom, and learning as the sign of a pharisaical and slavish bondage."¹⁰ Opposing free schools as an unnecessary tax burden, they viewed education provided by such schools as totally unrelated to their needs. The social environment of Rhode Island operated against any attempt to establish free schools. The most influential groups — plantation owners and small farmers — strongly opposed the free school movement, while the least significant group — shopkeepers, mechanics, and small manufacturers — weakly supported it.

John Howland's role was critical to the success of the free school movement in overcoming the opposition generated by this economic, political, and social environment. Born in Newport, Rhode Island, on October 31, 1757, he was the fourth of eight children. His parents, self-educated and of moderate means, taught him at an early age rudiments of reading and writing and sent him to a private school for several months when he was ten years old. A member of the Reverend Samuel Hopkins's congregation, his father brought him to hear sermons of such prominent men as George Whitefield, Joseph Bellamy, and Ezra Stiles. He also introduced him to the Reverends

William Vinal and Gardiner Thurston who allowed him access to their private libraries that were among the finest in the area.¹¹

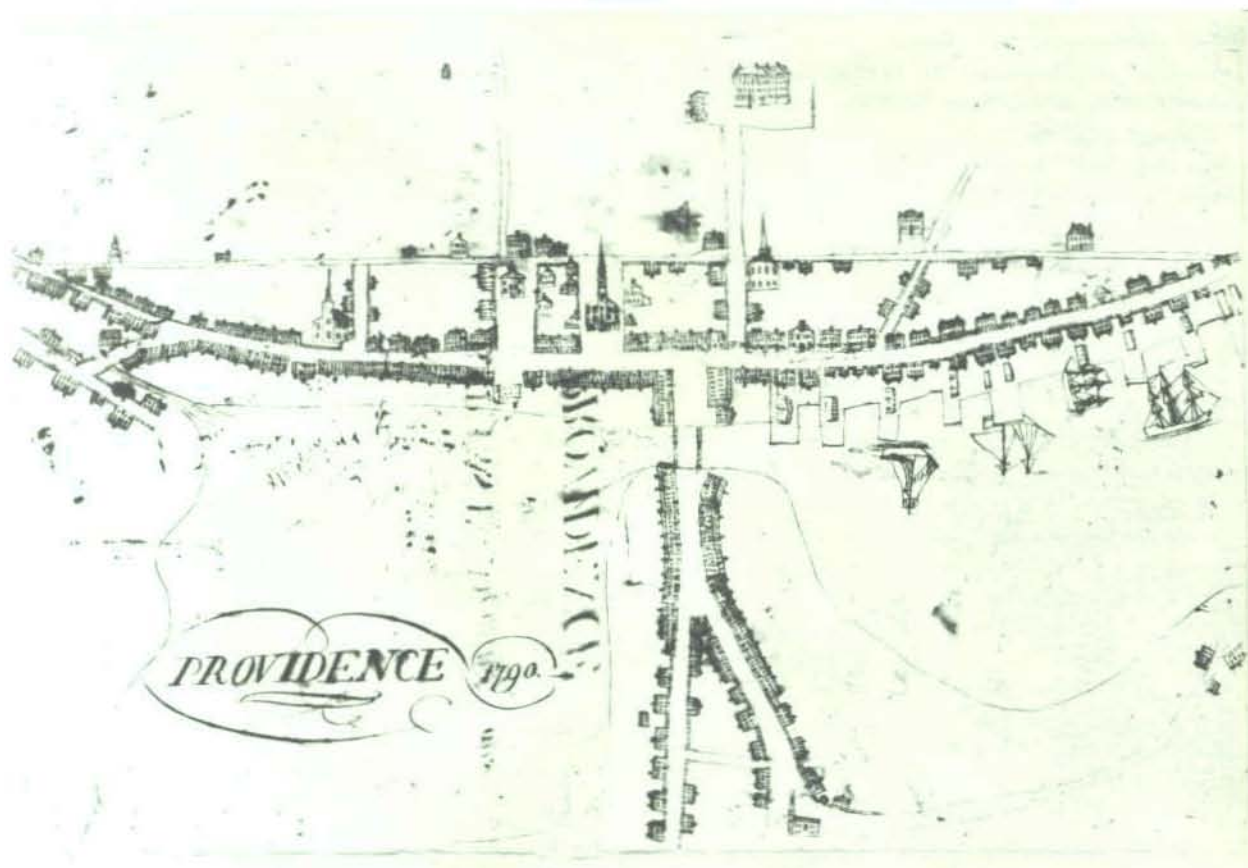
Shortly after his twelfth birthday, Howland left Newport and became the apprentice of Benjamin Gladding, a Providence hairdresser. His apprenticeship was disrupted by enlistments in the Continental army for three different campaigns during the Revolutionary War. He endured the hardships of the winter of 1776, fought under George Washington at Trenton and Princeton, and participated in two expeditions against Newport in 1777 and 1778. These interruptions prolonged his apprenticeship for over thirteen years, but this extended training period proved advantageous as it provided ample opportunities for social intercourse with the hairdressing shop's customers. Frequented by Providence's most prominent and influential men, Gladding's shop served as a literary and political exchange, affording Howland an unusually rich educational experience. He supplemented his learning in the "long winter evenings . . . by reading books of biography, travels and history, . . . by adding to his limited knowledge of arithmetic, and by [practicing] composition."¹²

Howland formulated his philosophy of life and education during these years. Since childhood when he had attended the sermons of Hopkins and Whitehead, who were apostles of Jonathan Edwards, he had embraced Calvinism's orthodox doctrines and Edwardian idealism.¹³ He believed in an all-determining God who created a design through which He operated and led men to a divinely appointed end. Essential to this divine design were the laws of nature — ideas in the mind of God that were established in the world of man after God created it. Howland had also been influenced in these early years by the Bible, which he had mastered while learning to read and write, and by Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. His familiarity with these works reinforced his rejection of individual freedom and his exalted view of divine authority. *Pilgrim's Progress* provided him with a model for his conception of divine design. Bunyan's portrayal of Christian's struggle against the various forms of evil and manifestations of human weakness served as a prototype for Howland's vision of mankind struggling to unfold the divine design and to attain happiness in this life and unity with God in the next. The Bible pro-

vided him with a version of mankind's history as a sacred drama in which God was the dramatist, director, and audience. Howland saw man's struggle as a continuation of the plot in this sacred drama. He also believed that the divine design would make possible the happiness of man and his ultimate unity with God.¹⁴ Later in life, Howland's examination of William Ellery Channing's writings, especially those concerning the paternalistic conception of God, convinced him that the all-determining divine being was benevolent and good. God's will moved inexorably toward realization, while man, as His determined instrument, carried out the divine design.¹⁵

Howland in 1783 became an officer of the Benevolent Congregational Society, and sermons of the Reverends Enos Hitchcock, pastor of the First Congregational Church of Christ, and James Manning, president of Brown University, led him to believe that education, as a divinely-bestowed tool, facilitated consummation of the divine design.¹⁶ Hitchcock's belief that education must provide man "with the most useful knowledge," open his mind "to receive the light," and examine the truth "even of the glorious gospel of Christ," clearly anticipated Howland's opinions of education as a means to provide man with a knowledge of mechanic arts, to motivate him to become a "useful member of society," and to equip him to recognize divine truth by inspiring him to accept it.¹⁷ Manning's belief in the need for an educated citizenry because all men were "dependent on the information and integrity of their neighbors," and his belief that "disbursements necessary to qualify these individuals for usefulness should be made from common funds" were reflected in Howland's contention that society's relation to education specified the duty of every man to support free schools so that succeeding generations would be qualified "to act their parts in life with advantage to the public and reputation to themselves."¹⁸

In 1784 Howland opened his own shop and, at the suggestion of several prominent citizens, charged higher prices than his competitors. Higher prices gave to his shop a distinctive quality that attracted influential patrons including town leaders and politicians of every shade of belief. As in his apprenticeship years, Howland digested a wealth of political information and he attained insights into the characters and opinions of leading men.¹⁹



RIHS Library

Map of Providence, 1790, by John Fitch. Benefit Street, where John Howland's house was located, is the horizontal street near the top. The steepled building at the left end of Benefit Street is Whipple Hall, later the public North School.

Howland's initial efforts as a master hairdresser proved lucrative and within two years after he had opened his shop he purchased from Gershom Jones a lot of land at 56 Benefit Street for "100 good silver Spanish milled dollars" and built a two-story, wooden house. Soon his financial position was seriously undermined by the state's paper money. From May 1786 to October 1789, the government of Rhode Island, controlled by paper money advocates, issued large quantities of worthless currency and passed laws forcing its acceptance as "legal tender at par with specie." To avoid accepting this worthless currency for his merchandise and services, Howland in 1787 closed his shop joining other merchants and artisans who had discontinued all business transactions. He reopened it in 1788, but his financial situation had so deteriorated that he sold one-half of his house to John Russell for "one-hundred good

silver Spanish Mill dollars."²⁰

Financial reverses did not deter his marital plans. In 1788 he married Mary Carlyle, granddaughter of James Franklin, oldest brother of Benjamin Franklin. Seven children were born in the first ten years of the marriage, but four died before the age of three. Howland found his income severely taxed by medical bills, burial fees, and the expense of supporting a large family. He realized he could not afford to send his three children of school age to private schools — the only available schooling at the time. The most inexpensive private school operated by his friend, the Reverend James Wilson, cost \$2.50 per quarter for each child — an additional annual expense of at least \$30.²¹

Howland's philosophy and personal experiences led him to question the community's failure to educate its young. He believed that

because the welfare of the individual and that of society were inextricably tied, it was the social duty of the people to provide education for all children. Unless children were educated, he was convinced there would not be an enlightened citizenry to provide moral and civic leadership.²² Since he believed that education, of sacred origin, had the divine purpose of facilitating consummation of the divine design, his philosophy filled him with a sense of responsibility to do all in his power to advance the cause of education.

Howland deeply felt the deficiencies of his early education. Deprived of formal schooling, he was determined that his children would not labor under a similar handicap. When his financial circumstances would not allow him to send his children to private schools, he was drawn to the cause of free schools — the only opportunity for "poor mechanics to procure . . . [educational] advantages for their sons and daughters" without cost.²³

Howland was acquainted with the attitude of Rhode Islanders who opposed free schools. Practicing his trade, he heard different classes in the social spectrum express their views on leading issues of the day. He also developed close friendships with economic, political, and social leaders such as Governors Stephen Hopkins and Jabez Bowen, Assemblymen Stephen Olney and Christopher Lippitt, the Reverend James Wilson, Theodore Foster, James Burrill, Jr., John Brown, Richard Jackson, Jr., and Thomas P. Ives. Several of these regular customers and intimate friends were involved in the two attempts to establish free schools in Providence prior to 1800. John Brown and Charles Keene in 1767 were on the committee responsible for erection of schoolhouses. Bowen, Hopkins, and Moses Brown determined regulations for schools. Keene, Moses Brown, and John Brown were on the 1791 committee responsible for erection of schools, with Hitchcock, Moses Brown, Bowen, Foster, and Manning composing the regulations. They told Howland about the social and economic factors that had contributed to their failure in 1767, and he witnessed directly the political factors that frustrated their effort in 1791.²⁴ These experiences provided invaluable insights into the forces, personalities, conflicts, interests, and strategies that had shaped the early free school movement. An understanding enjoyed

by few others enabled him to anticipate the path such a movement must follow to succeed.

When Howland took the initiative in 1795 to establish free schools, he was a member of the Providence Association of Mechanics and Manufacturers. Although the association had been founded only six years earlier, it had already become one of the most influential organizations in Providence and an important voice in the state. Its members included one-fourth of the freeholders and more than half of the skilled artisans or mechanics in Providence. Interested in education from its inception, the association took early action to provide for the education of its members' orphaned children. This concern with education reflected the priorities of its charter members, many of whom had been active in various schemes for promoting education since the mid-eighteenth century.²⁵ Howland joined the association in 1789 and attended every meeting for the next sixty-one years. He left the following account of how the members realized their educational deficiencies and how he became their appointed spokesman in the free schools movement:

When we came together in our Association, we made the discovery of our deficiencies. There were papers to be drawn, and various kinds of writing to be done, that few of us were competent to execute. Then we began to talk. The question was asked, ought not our children to have better advantages of education than we have enjoyed? And the answer was yes. Then it was asked, how shall those advantages be secured? The reply was, we must have better schools. So when we had talked the matter over pretty thoroughly among ourselves, we began to agitate. As I was something of a talker, and had practiced writing more than most of my associates, a good deal of this work fell to my lot. And I was very willing to do it, because I felt and saw its importance.²⁶

On February 11, 1796, Bennett Wheeler, a charter member of the association, printed in his newspaper, the *United States Chronicle*, an article favoring tax-supported schools:

[U]ntil public permanent provision is made, by taxation, to support public schools, which shall be accessible to all classes of the youth of the state, it will follow, that a great majority must grow up in ignorance of those plain and common

*branches of learning absolutely necessary to form good republican citizens, or useful members of society.*²⁷

This article reflected feelings of most association members. Within two years, the association appointed Howland, Joel Metcalf, William Richmond, Peter Grinnell, Richard Anthony, Grindall Reynolds, Samuel Thurber, Jr., and Nathan Fisher to a special committee charged with drafting a memorial petitioning the General Assembly for establishment of free schools. As chairman of this committee, Howland sought to draw a memorial that would embody the members' individual views. When they read his draft, they withdrew their own, adopting his version. As he later explained:

*I told the committee I . . . did not believe in petitioning legislators to do their duty. We ought on the contrary, in addressing that body, to assume a tone of confidence that with the case fairly stated, they would decide wisely and justly for the rising generations.*²⁸

Before submitting the memorial to the assembly Howland made an eloquent plea to the members of the association, asking them to dedicate themselves completely to the struggle for free schools:

*Most of us who are at present members of this Association, have had but few advantages of education, but it will be our fault, as well as the fault of our fellow citizens, if the next generation is not better taught. Perhaps this is a subject on which we are too indifferent. It is a subject which ought to be the lesson of the day, and the story of the evening. Let it be said in all private companies; let it be asserted in all public bodies; let it be declared in all places, till it has grown into a proverb; that it is the duty of the legislature to establish free schools throughout the state.*²⁹

The memorial requesting that the assembly "make legal provision for the establishment of Free Schools sufficient to educate all the children . . . through the state" was presented to the assembly in February 1799. The petition listed four reasons for free schools:

That the means of education which are enjoyed in this state, are very inadequate to a purpose so highly important; That numbers of the rising generation, whom nature has liberally endowed, are suffered to grow up in ignorance, when a

*common education would qualify them to act their parts in life with advantage to the public, and reputation to themselves; That in consequence of there being no legal provision for the establishment of schools, and for the want of public attention and encouragement, this so essential a part of our social duty is left to the partial patronage of individuals, whose cares cannot extend beyond the limits of their own families, while numbers in every part of the state are deprived of a privilege which it is the common right of every child to enjoy; . . . That liberty and security, under a republican form of government, depend on a general diffusion of knowledge among the people.*³⁰

These reasons summarized the basic tenets of Howland's educational philosophy — his belief in a good common education that would provide a practical preparation for useful living as well as moral preparation and spiritual enlightenment, in the social duty of all men to make adequate provision for the common right of every child in society to an education, in educating future citizenry to insure the liberty of government and security of property in future generations.

The memorial placed the free schools issue squarely before the assembly, but the legislature was reluctant to act and did not pass a free school law until sixteen months later.

Howland wrote a number of articles for the local newspapers in which he sought to respond to the proposed law's opponents and to persuade the indifferent to rally to its support. In an article for the *United States Chronicle* on August 1, 1799, Howland answered those who opposed free schools because they would require additional taxes. He warned that education available to only those who could afford it "would create distinctions, and fix prejudices very unfavorable to free governments." A system of free schools available to all would "have a happy influence on the rising generation, and a tendency to harmonize and unite every class in society, promote a love of order, a cheerful obedience to the laws, and a general acquiescence in government." He realized that such a system would appear to create an unequal tax in which "some with large families of children will pay little [while] others with none will pay largely." But he rejected this argument as a narrow view:

A more extensive survey will refute, and convince every candid mind, that the additional strength which government will derive from this source, will more than balance every pecuniary consideration. A general dissemination of useful knowledge, will produce a general reformation of manners, an increased respect for rulers, a cheerful obedience to the laws, and a ready subordination through every grade in society. Society thus qualified, will greatly add to the general security of property, whereby every individual will be benefited in proportion to what he possesses and in full ratio to what he will contribute.

Howland concluded if the money that the state spent to execute its penal laws "was turned into the channel of education, and habits of industry thereby cultivated under the united influence of its leading characters, it would almost supercede their necessity." State funds could then be used to build schoolhouses instead of state prisons and the taxpayers' expense would "not be increased but only drawn in a different, and turned into a more useful and regular channel." Howland also addressed those who questioned the wisdom of bringing all classes of society into a common school system. On the basis of his philosophy that education recognized and promoted natural laws, a divine vehicle for binding men together in mutual respect and dependence, Howland asserted:

In the free schools the offspring of every class will meet, and associate, copy from each other and compound virtues, which are peculiarly attached to each in their various situations in life. And while the young and tender mind is susceptible of more soft impression, they will form lasting friendships highly beneficial, to cement the bonds of that future society, in which each will fill some useful station.³¹

In an article submitted to the *Providence Gazette* on April 26, 1800, Howland contended that the success of American democracy could be traced to free schools that produced some of the nation's "greatest and best men." He pointed to the example of Benjamin Franklin who, as a product of such schools, became one of the country's "greatest ornaments" and one of its "most useful citizens." He quoted Franklin's will, which expressed great praise for free school education, and he concluded that "if the free schools about

to be established in this state should produce but one Franklin in an age, perhaps the establishment would be well worth trying."³²

Howland's last article on the free school issue appeared in the *Providence Gazette*, May 10, 1800. He attacked farmers for their opposition to the law, declaring that it dishonored the father of a family who denied his child the education now in his power to provide. He likened the act of a farmer who neglected his children's education to "taking away a right eye and cutting off the right arm from those whom natural affection, every hour, admonishes him, in the most persuasive language, to guard, instruct, and foster in his bosom." He reminded farmers that after they died their children would have "to come forward and transact the concerns of the public, . . . going through the same, or a more important routine of the public service" than their parents had done. But Howland warned that this "will be impossible, unless they have received such a degree of scholastic education, at least, as is commonly bestowed" in free schools. He also appealed to the practical nature of farmers by suggesting that education prepared the impressionable young mind for a useful and virtuous life. "[I]f you wish to see your sons *useful*, and your daughters *respectable*," he wrote, "give them so much education as least, as shall qualify them for the common occupations and offices of the country in which you live." He concluded by reminding the farmers that the obligation to educate children was a moral responsibility for which they were accountable. Based on his belief that education facilitated consummation of divine design, he condemned their failure to support free schools and requested those "of you who are parents and heads of families, and who are careless and unconcerned in regard to the instruction and information of those whom God has placed under you, to reflect upon your conduct; and to consider how you will be able to answer for this criminal neglect to yourselves, to your country, to your God."³³

Receiving the association's memorial in February 1799, the General Assembly referred the subject to a committee and instructed it to report by the session's end. The committee's members — James Burrill, Jr., Richard Jackson, Jr., and Moses Lippitt — lacked experience with the free school



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Portrait of James Burrill, Jr., *anonymous, late eighteenth century.*

movement and knowledge of the unique obstacles some Rhode Islanders raised to it. Only twenty-seven years old, Burrill had attended private schools prior to his graduation from Brown University. He was familiar chiefly with views of the wealthy and professional groups. Jackson, a businessman who had lived in Connecticut most of his life, was in 1799 organizing the Providence Washington Insurance Company — a task which occupied most of his time and effort. Lippitt was not involved in any activities connected with the free school movement either before or after he served on the committee. Burrill, however, was state attorney-general, son of the association's president, and an intimate acquaintance of Howland. He prepared a report and bill by working closely with Howland for four months, "readily complying with . . . [his] suggestions." The report, submitted in June 1799, was favorable, and the bill which accompanied it was a draft of a free school law entitled "An Act To Establish Free Schools."⁵⁴

The bill provided for establishment and maintenance of free schools to serve white inhabitants between the ages of six and twenty in every town. It specified the minimum number of schools for each town and the minimum length of time schools were to remain open. Each town complying with its provisions would receive one-fifth of the preceding year's state taxes paid to the general treasury by that town, provided the amount did not exceed six thousand dollars in any one year. This money was "exclusively appropriated to the establishment and support of free schools" and any town that failed to establish them forfeited "all right or claim to the allowance." The bill empowered any seven freemen of a school district to call for a town meeting to establish and maintain free schools. After the freemen of the town had been duly appraised of the meeting, and given sufficient time to act on the matter, the seven freemen would constitute a quorum and could "appoint a clerk, treasurer, collector . . . and order an assess" of whatever taxes necessary for the schools to be collected in the same manner and under the same laws and regulations as town taxes. Finally, it reserved to town councils "the government of the town and district schools in their respective towns."⁵⁵

Reflecting insights that only someone with Howland's understanding of the Rhode Island environment could have provided, the bill had sections specifically designed to reduce or remove the obstacles to free schools raised by various opposing forces. It sought to lessen the hostility that the new financial burden of free schools would generate in the towns by returning a sizable portion of taxes. It sought to placate towns that considered the free school act a challenge to their sovereignty by placing the control of free schools exclusively in the hands of town councils. And it sought to overcome the obstructive tactics of certain groups who refused to act by empowering any seven freemen in a district to create necessary machinery for erection and maintenance of a free school.

The General Assembly ordered five hundred copies of the report and bill to be printed and distributed to legislators and town clerks. Curious to learn the opinions of the towns, the assembly refused to act on the matter until the bill had been "referred to the freemen for instruction."⁵⁶

When the bill came before the town meeting in Providence, Howland, Samuel W. Bridgham, William Richmond, George R. Burrill, and William Larned were appointed to prepare instructions to the representatives. Anticipating the town meeting's action, Howland presented to the committee a set of instructions "he had set up the night before, til 11 o'clock to prepare." The committee accepted the document without alteration and the town adopted it and sent it to the representatives.³⁷

The document instructed the representatives to support the bill's adoption in its present form and to not modify it until later "when experience . . . could point out to the legislature the expediency of a different arrangement." It asked the representatives to lay aside party politics and to present a strong united front. Advocating Howland's belief in education as a divine tool that contributed to the attainment of a divine goal, the document demanded that establishment of free schools transcend vested interests of political party or of man:

On the question of free schools, gentlemen, all party distinctions are broken down; here there can be no clashing interests. On this subject, one section of the state cannot be opposed to another. Before this benevolent idea, every partial narrow motive of local policy must disappear.

In the document Howland expressed confidence that his "fellow citizens throughout the state, . . . actuated by the same anxious solicitude for the public good, . . . would . . . provide for the full enjoyment of a right which forms so essential an article in the great system of social order."³⁸

Once Howland was certain that Providence would vote for the act, he directed his efforts toward attaining support of other towns. He wrote to the town clerk of Newport "urging him to get an article inserted in the warrant for the town meeting, to instruct their representatives to vote for the bill before the Assembly." He also traveled to Newport and attained the support of George Champlin, the town's principal representative. Champlin persuaded that large and influential town to follow in Providence's path and to instruct its representatives to approve the bill. Howland used similar tactics to gain Smithfield's support and to curb opposition in other towns.

By autumn 1799, his campaign proved so successful that the house of representatives passed the act by a large majority. The senate, however, hesitated and did not consider the bill until the spring session of 1800. At this time Howland was able to attain the support of Senator John Innis Clarke. As he later recalled:

One day, in early part of the session, I met Joel Metcalf, a man of strong good sense, who had interested himself in the matter of public schools. "Come," said I, "you and I must go up to the Senate to-day and get them to call up the school bill." "Well," he replied, "I don't know as we can influence that honorable body." "We can try," I responded. And so we went. We saw John Innis Clarke, a senator, and told him our errand. "Well," said he, "the governor and senate are to dine with me to-day, and I will do what I can to secure favorable action." We left, and went up to the senate chamber in the afternoon. As soon as I opened the door, Clarke rose and came to me, and said, "the school bill has just passed." "Was it opposed?" I inquired. "No," he replied, "I called it up, and it was passed without a word of opposition."³⁹

When the free school act became law on March 13, 1800, Providence quickly set into motion machinery establishing a public school system. At a town meeting on April 16, a committee consisting of Howland, Richard Jackson, Jr., James Burrill, Jr., John Carlisle, Joel Metcalf, and William Richmond was appointed to "devise and report a plan for carrying the school act into effect." The committee assigned the task to Howland, who promptly drew up a plan adopted by the town ten days later.

Under this plan, four schools were to be established — three on the east and one on the west side of the river. Howland, Jackson, and Carlisle were appointed to purchase rights to two privately-owned schools, Whipple Hall and the Brick Schoolhouse, and to purchase lots for two schools to be built. Howland, as chairman of this committee, was chiefly responsible for making sure the shares of the private schools were purchased without delay:

Afternoon after afternoon, accompanied by Paul Allen . . . [he] traversed the north end in search of the proprietors. Sometimes . . . [they] found one at home, and another in the street. In this way . . .

[they] picked up shares . . . [Howland] making the contract, and Allen, as justice of the peace, legalizing it.

Largely through Howland's efforts, a lot for a schoolhouse site on the town's south side was obtained. He persuaded the reluctant owner to sell and won him over completely to the free school cause:

This land belonged to a gentleman who was unwilling to have a school for two hundred scholars so near his house and garden. . . . I went to see him. I asked the ground of his objections. He said if a school was established there, the neighborhood would be a perfect bedlam everytime it was dismissed. Besides, his garden would be robbed of all its fruit. These were very natural fears. But I assured him they were groundless. Under our rules the school would be dismissed by classes, and not permitted to loiter about the premises, and as to his gardens, so strict a watch would be kept over the scholars, that his fruit would be safer than ever. I cannot repeat all my arguments on this occasion. It is sufficient to say, that before I left him, he consented to sell.

Sometimes after when the schools had gone fairly into operation, the town council, accompanied by the school committee, made their first visit to this school. When opposite his residence, I requested the company to pause til I went in and invited him to go with us. They did so. I went in, and said, "I have been deputed by the honorable town council and school committee, to invite you to accompany them in their first visit of examination." . . . He appeared gratified with the attention, and readily complied with our invitation. I will not say there was not a little policy in this. At all events it had a good effect. Our skeptical friend was delighted with all he saw and heard, and was ever after a firm supporter of the public schools.⁴⁰

In the plan for implementing the school act, Howland recommended a four thousand dollar appropriation to finance schools. This appropriation, which was to be obtained by a tax increase, was strongly debated at a town meeting on April 26. Free schools opponents argued that the amount — more than half the \$7,843.15 required the preceding year for all the town's regular expenses — was too extravagant. Howland's ability as an adroit tactician not only enabled the

supporters of free schools to overcome the attempt to block the appropriation but to increase the amount by two thousand dollars:

[T]he Committee knew that Four Thousand dollars would not be sufficient but did not recommend a larger sum for fear it would not pass, as this School Tax was to be in addition to the usual Town Tax. But the enemies of the School System, in order to obstruct it, ridiculed the idea of Four Thousand dollars, and that the Tax should not be less than Twelve Thousand, knowing that the sum could not be carried, and thereby defeat the whole. After speeches pro and con between 4000 and 12000 I proposed by way of compromise that the Tax be Six Thousand, and the Moderator, R. Jackson, on my motion being seconded instantly put the vote which we carried before our opponents had time to rally against this new and to them unexpected motion. They were mortified and vexed, their intention was that there should be no tax, and their movement gave us 2000 more than we dared ask for. . . . Two of the strongest opponents came up to me and said, "you have taken us in — we didn't intend to vote you so much money." "You have taken yourselves in, and I am glad of it," I replied.⁴¹

The town appointed the first school committee in August 1800. On October 13, 1800, this committee — in conjunction with the town council — appointed a subcommittee of Howland, the Reverend Enos Hitchcock, Joseph Jenckes, and President Jonathan Maxcy of Brown University to draft "suitable rules and regulations for the discipline and government of the public schools about to be established." The subcommittee assigned this task to Howland who, using the regulations "relative to the government of free schools in Boston" as his model, developed within five days a set of regulations immediately adopted by the town council and school committee.⁴²

The rules opened the schools to "all [white] children of both sexes" who were to be "faithfully instructed without preference or partiality." They stressed moral education and the importance of children learning "to conduct themselves in a sober, orderly and decent manner, both in and out of school." Insisting that the system of instruction be "uniform in the several schools, and the pronunciation as near alike as possible," the

rules specified that schools were to open six hours a day for five days a week, Saturday and Sunday excluded, and extend all year round. They established a curriculum that included "Spelling, Accenting and Reading both Prose and Verse . . . a General Knowledge of English Grammar and Composition . . . writing a good hand . . . and Arithmetic through all the previous Rules, and Vulgar and Decimal Fractions including Tare and Tret, Fellowship, Exchange Interest etc." They placed pupils "into separate Classes, according to their several improvements, each Sex by themselves." The rules demanded that pupils "pay a particular attention to the Laws and Regulations of the School" and empowered teachers to use "all reasonable means . . . to bring him or her to Order and a just sense of Duty." Holidays were specified as Christmas Day, July Fourth, Thanksgiving, public fasts, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of commencement week, the day after each quarterly visitation, the last Monday in April, and regimental training day in October.⁴⁵

Howland, in drafting these rules, was able to translate into practice three major tenets of his educational philosophy. His belief in education as the common right of every child was realized in part by the regulation that opened schools to all white children of both sexes without preference or partiality. His belief in education as practical preparation for useful living was implemented in the curriculum that stressed reading, writing, and rules in Tare and Tret and exchange interest necessary for farmers, shopkeepers and merchants to maintain records and transact business. His belief in education as moral preparation was emphasized in the regulation that sought to impress a moral character upon pupils that would affect their behavior both in and out of school.

On the last Monday of October, 1800, the Providence public school system began its first session with nine hundred and eighty-eight pupils in attendance. Passage of the 1800 act did not establish free schools throughout the state. Except for Providence and Smithfield, the towns protested or refused to fully implement the act. And in 1803 the law was repealed. Howland, however, focused his efforts on maintaining a successful free school system in Providence.⁴⁴ For the next twenty-two years he served on the school

committee and exercised a direct influence over its actions. He attended the committee's meetings regularly and usually participated in its quarterly visitations and examinations of schools. He also served on special committees that revised rules governing the schools, purchased additional land for schools, and replaced textbooks.⁴⁵

Howland resigned from the school committee in June 1822 but continued to play an active role in the free school cause. In 1824, he served on a special committee to consider the adoption by Providence schools of the Lancastrian plan that utilized the monitorial or mutual assistance system. Between 1824 and 1829, he provided the committee responsible for the establishment of free schools in Newport with invaluable information gained from his experiences in Providence. He drafted a memorial in 1838 for the Providence Association of Mechanics and Manufacturers requesting resumption of quarterly visitations by the full school committee and town council, an increase in teachers' salaries, and creation of large regional-type schools.⁴⁶

Howland actively supported free schools until his death. His final entry in his personal recollections reflected the pride and satisfaction he enjoyed as an advocate for education in Rhode Island:

I did what Roger Williams never attempted or never had a disposition to do. I formed and brought into existence the public schools in this town which Governor Hopkins once attempted but could not accomplish. . . . These great and most important events add to the benefit and respect of this now city for ages after the world shall have forgotten that such a being ever existed as John Howland.⁴⁷

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- 2 Edwin M. Stone, *The Life and Recollections of John Howland* (Providence, 1857), 138-148.
- 3 Carroll, 33-34, 77.
- 4 William R. Staples, *Annals of Providence* (Providence, 1843), 500; Carroll, 56-57.
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- 12 Howland, "Recollections," 1, 63-67, 90-94, 98-100; Providence Preservation Society, *Catalogue for the Third Street Festival* (Printed courtesy of the Old Stone Bank, May 11, 1962), 22; Stone, *Life*, 27.
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- 15 Howland, "A Biographical Sketch of the Rev. James Manning," *Rhode Island Literary Repository*, 1: 10 (Jan. 1815): 515-516. For Channing's influence on Howland's philosophy see Russo, "Educational," 118-123.
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- 21 Franklyn Howland, *A Brief Genealogical and Biographical History of Arthur, Henry, and John Howland and Their Descendents of the United States and Canada* (New Bedford, 1885), 354; Wilson, *Paddy*, 38.
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