

First Settlers in East Providence

By W. LEROY WOOD

William Blackstone or Blaxton was the first white settler of Rehoboth, coming from Boston. He it was who gave the Boston Common to the settlers of that town. In 1635, he built a home on the upper waters of the Seekonk River, today known as the Blackstone River. The place where the walls of his house were raised, then a part of Rehoboth, about three miles above the city of Pawtucket, is now known as Cumberland, R. I.

Roger Williams was the second white man to come to the region now known as Rhode Island, and the first white man to come to what is today East Providence. He arrived in the spring of 1636. But following the advice of his friend, the Governor of Plymouth, who did not desire to displease the Bay Colony, Roger Williams moved to the westward, across the Seekonk.

Another white man has left his name on the early records, although the information regarding him is meagre. In the Plymouth Colonial Records (Vol. II, page 67) we learn that one, John Hazell was living at "Seacunck" in the year 1642.

The man whom we regard as the real founder of Rehoboth, and particularly of the part to be later known as East Providence, was the Rev. Samuel Newman. It has been said that "the history of the early colonies is the history of the churches." The Rev. Samuel Newman was a pastor in Yorkshire, England, for ten years. Dissatisfied with religious conditions in England, he came to America in 1635. For four years he made his home in Dorchester, Mass. In 1639, he became pastor of the Weymouth Church, staying in that town for four years.

In the spring of 1644, he left Weymouth with nearly three score men and their families and came to the westerly bounds of Plymouth Colony. Arriving at the region bordering the Seekonk River they decided to make this their home. The Indians called the region "Seekonk" or "Seacunk." It is believed that the name was the combination of two Indian words, "seaki" meaning black, and "konk," goose—black goose. These geese frequently alighted in the Seekonk River and cove as they passed over the section. The Rev. Mr. Newman called the place "Rehoboth" for he said, "the Lord hath opened a way for us." (Gen. 26:24.) The word means room or broad place.

From the records and accounts of the beginning of the town we learn that the houses of this first colony were built in a semi-circle around Seekonk Common, opening toward the Seekonk River, with the church and the minister's house in the center. This has been referred to frequently as "the Ring of the Town."

Where was the site of this Ring? Beyond the fact that the Ring encircled the common and opened toward the river, we find no record. Seekonk Common lay between the junction of Pleasant Street and Pawtucket Avenue, and the junction of Pawtucket and Newman Avenues.

From a resident of Rumford who has taken a deep interest in the events and conditions in the early colony—Mr. George ¹Carpenter, we learn that at one time a row of buttonwood trees followed the outline of this ring. Today none of these trees are living. Thirty years ago one of these trees was standing. During his youth Mr. Carpenter noted and marked the site of eight of these trees. He was told by some of the older inhabitants of the town that they formed a part of the original line of trees which extended along the Ring of the town.

¹Son of Horatio Carpenter.

The location of the trees that Mr. Carpenter noted are marked upon the accompanying map. By them we can trace the probable outline of the "Ring." We see that the conditions of the record are met, that the Ring was around the Common, opening toward the river, with the church in the center.

The first church building erected by these colonists stood to the south of the present building. It is believed to have stood on the site of the Newman monument in the cemetery. This first building was erected in 1646, and was said to be a very crude structure.

Seventy-one years later it was replaced by another building which was north of the monument, near the site of the tomb, and still on the south side of the road. In 1810, a third building was erected, this time across the road. This building is still standing, the present Newman Church, known to the people of this vicinity and to the patrons of the United Electric Railway as the "White Church."

Its predecessor was taken down and the timbers were used for² the frame and planks for the walls of the Old Town Hall, which is located on Pawtucket Avenue at East Providence Center (Rumford). There is a tradition,² we are told, that this Town Hall was first located where the Union Primary School now stands, but that there is no means of verifying that statement. So far as the records show, this building stood on the present location of the Public Library at the the Center until 1904, when it was moved to its present site, and the Library built upon its earlier location.

In his "History of Rehoboth," Mr. Leonard Bliss gives us the following account of an early town meeting as noted in the town record of that early colony.

"At a general meeting of the town of Seakunk being the 9th of the 10th month (December) 1644, at law-

²*Providence Evening Bulletin*, Aug. 27, 1928.

ful warning given, by reason of many meetings, and other strong causes for the easing of the great trouble, and for the (word illegible) and the deciding of controversies between party and party as well as the proposing of men's levies to be made and paid, and for the well ordering of the town affairs, as may stand with future equity, according to our former combination, the inhabitants of said place have chosen these men here named—

Alexander Winchester	William Smith
Walter Palmer	Robert Martin
Richard Bowen	Henry Smith
Richard Wright	Stephen Payne

“These men were called ‘Townsmen’ and were the predecessors of the officials who today constitute the Town Council. But these Townsmen had greater powers than do the members of the present Town Council. At a subsequent meeting of the Townsmen it was ordered that the recording of any man's land in the Town Book shall be to him and his heirs a sufficient assurance forever.

“In 1645, the people submitted to the jurisdiction of the Plymouth Court and were incorporated under the name of Rehoboth. On the 9th of June, 1645, lots were drawn for land upon the great plain, and the list gives, it is reasonable to suppose, the names of all the original settlers.” This list can be read in the histories of both Bliss and Tilton.