**Roger Williams**

The Puritan minister Cotton Mather called Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, colonial America’s “first rebel.” Deeply devout, Williams took the position that each person should decide how best to worship God without any interference from civil authorities. Williams also argued that the English had no right to seize Indian lands or to force Indians to convert to Christianity.

Williams had a knack for learning languages and a skill at shorthand writing. He excelled in reading, religion, writing, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Dutch, French, logical thinking, and public speaking. His parents raised him to follow the Church of England, but at some point early in his life, Williams became a Puritan. He was one of a growing number of English men and women who wanted to rid the Church of England of remnants of Catholicism that they believed lacked validity from the Bible, including elaborate church rituals. The Puritans also promoted a more direct relationship between believers and God.

Suffering intense persecution, many Puritans fled to the Netherlands or to the New World. In 1631, when Williams was in his late twenties, he migrated to Massachusetts Bay Colony, where many Puritans hoped to establish a godly commonwealth, a “city on a hill,” which might serve as a model of righteousness. His new congregation liked and respected him. Williams did not believe in taking money for being a preacher. He earned his living by farming and trading blankets and knives with the Indians.

Williams believed each person should follow his or her own conscience. He also thought the church should not be involved with the government, and that the Indians, not the king of England, owned the land. Williams denied that the Puritan colonial government had any right to intrude on an individual’s relationship with God. It could not, in his opinion, force an individual to observe the Sabbath (a day of rest) or even forbid a person from taking God’s name in vain. Later in life, he went even further, and refused to participate in any organized church.

In 1635, before Massachusetts authorities could arrest him, Williams fled in a raging snowstorm. For fourteen weeks he struggled to survive in the wilderness before making his way to Narragansett Bay. There, he purchased land from Indians and founded a town he named Providence, the first English settlement in what would become Rhode Island. Williams would later convince English authorities to grant Rhode Island a royal charter, which prevented the colony from being absorbed by Massachusetts. He became a well-known peacemaker between the natives and the colonists. In Rhode Island, individuals could worship any God they wished – or none at all. Seeking religious freedom, Quakers, Jews and other religious minorities migrated to the colony. An ardent proponent of religious liberty, it is not an accident that Williams named one of his children “Freeborn.”