

Chapter IV

THE FIRST SETTLEMENTS ON NARRAGANSETT BAY THE PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS PORTSMOUTH AND NEWPORT

Providence Plantations

Roger Williams arrived in Boston in February 1631. Gov. Winthrop then spoke of him "as a Godly minister". Invited at an early date to supply the pulpit of the "First Church" in Boston, Williams made a critical and negative reply which induced Deputy Governor Endicott to advise caution by the Salem Church which proposed to select him as "teacher". He however "taught" for a time in Plymouth where he supported himself by manual labor, and here he met Massasoit (Osamequin) and began to study the Indian language. In June 1635, at the age of twenty-eight, he was ordained pastor of the Salem Church and so became associated with Endicott who was the chief deacon of the church and the most influential man in Salem. In October of the same year having announced his belief that "the natives are the true owners of the land; that a wicked person should not be called upon to 'swear' or to pray; and that the power of civil magistrates extends only to the body and to goods", his doctrines were held dangerous and against the authority of the magistrates and he was ordered to "withdraw from the jurisdiction and not return". Williams spent the winter at Plymouth and with Massasoit at Warren (also called Pokonoket or Sowamset), settled in the spring on the easterly banks of the Blackstone river, whence, after being reminded that he was there within the limits of Plymouth Colony, he moved across the river into Providence proper, into the lands of the Narragansett Indians, and became in 1637 the founder of the colony of Providence plantations.

Portsmouth and Newport

The schism in the Puritan church which most influenced the settlement of the Narragansett shores was not that of Roger Williams, but that of the Antinomians who had been largely fomented by Anne Hutchinson. She was a prominent member of Boston's first church, was charitable, versatile, fearless, sincere, the mother of a large family and the wife of a "mild-mannered" man. For three or four years (1634 to 1638) her influence increased till all but five members of the Boston church favored her doctrines. She held a midweekly conference at her hospitable home, at the corner of Washington and School streets in Boston, which was more largely attended than many of the church services, and at these meetings the sermon of the previous Sunday was discussed and often criticized, with result that the hostility of the clergy was aroused. Her doctrine of faith is historically termed "Antinomianism". Theologically she believed that the human soul held close communion with the Divine Over-soul; she believed in direct and special Divine revelation and in the spiritual Justification of the soul of man, with God, through Faith. It was the doctrine of "Justification through Faith" rather than that of "Sanctification through Works". Practically it amounted to a belief in free religious and revealed thought, a belief in the divorcement of Church and State, and of the equality of all men before the law.

This sect included in its members many if not most of the educated and influential Boston gentry, and in the election which followed for the control of the church fisticuffs were engaged in by the most devout, and a pastor harrangued the voters (all of whom were church members) from a tree. Prominent among the members of this sect was Dr. John Clark who was, by profession, both a physician and a clergyman, a Separatist in belief, and by education a graduate of the University of Leyden in Holland. Another prominent believer was William Coddington, who was then Deputy Governor. This faction carried Boston but they were out-voted by the country districts, and following their loss of control of the church Anne Hutchinson was tried for heresy, the trial lasting twenty-four days. At the end of that period she and most of her adherents were ordered to leave the colony. In their search for a suitable place in which to settle they visited Roger Williams in Providence. He recommended Sowamset at Warren, R. I. as a first choice and the Island of Rhode Island, then called Aquidneck, as a second choice. At the suggestion of Williams a delegation visited Plymouth to ascertain whether the Plymouth Colony claimed jurisdiction of either of these places, and being told that they claimed jurisdiction at

Sowamset but that they would be glad to have such a Godly colony settle upon the Island of Aquidneck, the new colonists migrated and settled there during the early part of the year 1638. They named their new town Pocasset and located it on the cove now known as "Town Pond" at Bristol Ferry in Portsmouth, R. I. The town site was at the southerly end of the pond. The house lots assigned to Gov. Coddington and to Dr. Clark were on the westerly shore of the pond, adjoining Mt. Hope bay, where the Pocasset golf links are now located.

At the end of a year (by 1639) more than a hundred families had settled at Pocasset, and the colony then divided. Most of the prominent men (including Gov. Coddington, Gov. Easton and Dr. Clark) removed to Newport and founded a colony there, and after that the Pocasset settlement was called Portsmouth. It was merged again with Newport in 1640, and in 1644 the freemen voted that the island be henceforth called the Isle of Rhodes, or Rhode Island. Aquidneck had been purchased on March 24, 1637 from Canonicus and Miantonomi, chief sachems of the Narragansetts. It had no charter till July 1663 when Dr. Clark who was a good diplomat secured a charter from King Charles II, the bounds of which included not only the site of the colony, but also overlapped Plymouth lands for a distance of three miles on the easterly and northerly shores of Narragansett Bay. King Charles II was a Catholic at heart, though the chief faction supporting him was the Presbyterian branch (the conservative or more strict branch) of the English church. In his coronation proclamation he promised freedom of religious thought for all his subjects, which of course would allow to the Catholics the same freedom of worship which was allowed churchmen and dissenters; but no English King had much interest in the "Separatists" who had settled in Plymouth. They had no such able representative at Court and no political fund to draw upon. Clark's colony of Rhode Island was the only one which allowed absolute freedom of religious activities; it was populous, had already overgrown its allotted territory and had overlapped into Plymouth lands, which were unprotected by any "Royal" charter.

Clark spent the greater part of twelve years in London before he secured this charter. It is said to have been written by his own hand. Its outstanding features were its recognition of the primary ownership of all colonial lands in the native Indians, — the recognition of majority rule, — and that freedom of worship and of conscience were the basis of individual right. That as Bicknell says is "true democracy".¹

¹ The first public free school was established in Newport in 1640.

Nothing, however, contributed more to the ascendancy of Rhode Island,² or to the overflow of its people into the less populous neighborhoods, than the lenient and sympathetic treatment there accorded to the Quakers. The first Quakers to settle in New England landed in Newport on August 3, 1657 in the "Woodhouse" (The Quaker Mayflower), a vessel, built and manned by Quakers and carrying six Quaker passengers. In 1656 two Quaker women had landed in Boston, coming from England via Barbadoes. They were deported at the expense of the ship's master after their books of "corrupt, heretical and blasphemous doctrines" had been publicly burned, and after they had been stripped and searched for witchcraft tokens. The Bay colony then passed drastic laws against the Quakers and those who interceded in their behalf were heavily fined. Mary Dyer, wife of William Dyer, Secretary of the Rhode Island colony for ten years, was publicly hung on Boston Common in 1660 for her "pernicious and dangerous doctrine of Quakerism".

In Plymouth colony, beginning the same year,³ the Quakers were prosecuted not so much for their belief, but because they reviled, and interfered with the established worship by interrupting the church services and by boisterous behavior within the church on the Sabbath day. There were ten "enforced departures" of Quakers from Plymouth colony and five strangers belonging to the sect were whipped for disturbance and contempt of Court. Appropriate laws were passed providing fines for attending or housing a Quaker meeting, and for harboring a foreign Quaker.

Roger Williams too was hostile to Quaker tenets, and when George Fox visited Newport in 1671 Williams challenged him to a debate. There were few Quakers in Providence, but many in Rhode Island. Governors Coddington and Easton became members of their church,⁴ and when we check up the names and former homes of those who became the first settlers of Fall River we find that they were pretty generally Quakers from Rhode Island. Clark himself was a Baptist, and the first minister of the Baptist church in Newport. He is buried there.⁵

The religious movement of the Society of Friends (Quakers) is discussed further in the Ecclesiastic (first section) of Fascicle II.

² It is interesting as determining the then relative importance of the settlements at Newport, Portsmouth and Providence, to note that the cost of procuring the charter was apportioned according to financial means, fifty pounds to Newport, thirty pounds to Portsmouth and twenty pounds to Providence.

³ Goodwin's Pilgrim Republic, page 477.

⁴ Bicknell's R. I. p. 531 and seq.

⁵ Bicknell has written his biography.