

Peace Road 2020 USA: Roger Williams - Freedom of Conscience in Rhode Island

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On July 29th, the Peace Road tour took us to the Roger Williams Memorial in Providence, RI. Here is the background of Roger Williams:

Religious freedom is an inexact science.

After the Church of England was formed by breaking off from the Roman Catholic Church, Puritans were a subset of the new church who thought the break with Catholicism needed to be more complete. Puritans wanted to "purify" the Church of England by making it more Protestant than it already was. They weren't a new denomination; they were just fed up remaining too cozy with Rome. The Puritans started non-conformist churches and dominated the Colony of Massachusetts.

Roger Williams was one of those Puritan rebels in Massachusetts, but then he rebelled against the Puritans themselves with "new and dangerous ideas." He was the first public figure to speak out against slavery, calling for its abolition. He also said the Pilgrims should have negotiated a purchase of their land from the Indians instead of just "discovering" a land which had already been discovered by the Native Americans who were born there. He also thought the government should stay out of religion and that people should follow their conscience in relating to God.

He called the King of England a liar, which further irritated people. Banished, he went across the river and started some plantations, procuring the land on good terms with the Indians and getting a charter from England. That land became the tiny colony of Rhode Island.

Baptists, Quakers, Jews and other dissenters and religious malcontents soon flocked there. With Williams' heretical "liberty of conscience" as its guiding principle, Rhode Island became the first place where religion and citizenship were separate.