

*The Virginia Mayflower Society's
Mildred Ramos Scholarship Recipient for 2015*



Brenton Alexander Morris of Cumberland, Virginia is a 2015 graduate of Cumberland High School.

Brenton will be attending Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg in the fall.

The Assigned Topic for the 2015 Essay was:

**“What did Roger Williams bring from the Plymouth Colony Experiment to the colony he founded in Rhode Island?
Did the ideas of Plymouth take root in Rhode Island?
Take a position and explain.”**

*(To read Brenton Morris' 2015 Mayflower Essay,
please scroll down to the next page.)*



(Continued)

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Virginia Mayflower Society
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How Roger Williams' Brief Plymouth Exposure Led to the Founding of Rhode Island

Following the harsh winter of 1635/6, on a brisk New England evening, Roger Williams made his historic first steps upon Slate Rock to meet with the Narragansett people. These footsteps seem to echo those of the Plymouth Colony Pilgrims' upon Plymouth Rock, as both the Plymouth Pilgrims and Rhode Island's founders were English Separatists that resented the intolerant tendencies of a much larger Puritan movement ("Massachusetts Bay Colony."). Just as the Church of England's tolerance of Puritan efforts began to erode in the early 17th century; so too did the Massachusetts Bay Colony's government and clerical leaders' permissiveness to the radical preaching of Roger Williams entirely deteriorate. His banishment from Massachusetts was the catalyst for the colonizing of Rhode Island. From the Plymouth Colony Experiment, Williams would learn the virtues of religious tolerance, freedom through the separation of church and state, diligent and arduous labor, and power sourcing from the consent of the governed.

As the 16th century concluded, a collective of families from Babworth, East Retford, and Nottinghamshire, England; incited by an aversion of the Anglican Church, uprooted themselves to seek religious refuge. Following a failed attempt at finding sanctuary in Leiden, they elected to visit the New World ("The Pilgrim Story."). When the Pilgrims made initial landfall in present-day Massachusetts, they were greeted only by the bitter winter that would wipe out nearly half of their population. Without the assistance of a captured Patuxet tribesman, called Tisquantum, the Pilgrims would have certainly been eliminated by disease, malnutrition, or aggression from Wampanoag Indians whose opinions of Englishmen had been marred by prior altercations (Baker 15). Initially, irrefutable tension existed between the two peoples, yet as their dependency upon the natives grew, the Pilgrims came to respect Wampanoag customs and traditions, within a mutually-beneficial relationship ("The Pilgrim Story."). Though their relationship was often fragile, the Pilgrims and natives learned from one another, traded goods, and prospered from their cooperation.

Throughout the duration of his Plymouth sojourn (1631-1633), Williams served as an assistant to his pastor, working “closely with the Indians, living with them and getting to know their language and their customs” (“Roger Williams Biography.”). He had adopted a goal of converting the Wampanoag people to Christianity, but later abandoned this objective, understanding that they have an inalienable right to worship in any manner they deem appropriate. As well perceived as he was by the natives, Williams often served as negotiator between his people and theirs. Just as the Pilgrims had done in their first difficult winter, he used his position as intermediary to derive “invaluable advice on local conditions for hunting, fishing, and agriculture” from the natives (Demos 5). Following his exile in October of 1635, he survived the winter only by finding shelter with the Indians. Plymouth ministers were expected to be of the working class, in accordance with their belief that diligent and arduous labor should be performed by all. This prepared Williams for his forced migration to the land of the Narragansett, where he continued to earn his living as he had in Plymouth: by farming and by trading with the Indians. Then, in keeping with his beliefs, he purchased the land he desired from the Indians. His original idea was not to conceive another colony himself, but to live among the Indians and preach to them; however, when several people from the Salem church approached him with the idea of a colony, Rhode Island was formed (“Roger Williams Biography.”). This colony supported admittance of people of all faiths, without the need to seek government permission.

The Massachusetts Bay Colony was hardly tolerant of other religions and cultures, unlike the aforementioned colonies of Plymouth and Rhode Island. Roger Williams arrived in New England under the impression that he would find a church completely separated from the Church of England; therefore, he was shocked to witness the same abhorrent persecution happening in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Fortunately, Plymouth’s people wanted to separate entirely from the Church of England. Williams expected minor differences based upon theology, geography, local group organization, and colonial culture, but was appalled to discover that the Puritans made many governmental decisions under strong influence of religion and refused to denounce the Anglican Church (“Massachusetts Bay Colony.”). Firm in his beliefs as a Separatist and outspoken as an advocate of the separation of church and state, Williams began to share his message. In Massachusetts, church and state worked hand in hand, but he argued that they could not continue to use the Holy Bible as a lawbook for punishing citizens. When forced to leave, he

and the Salem church dissenters founded their colony, ensuring that church and state operated independent of each other. This was indeed representative of his observations in Plymouth (“Roger Williams Biography.”).

The most ironic aspect of the dilemma that Williams faced while preaching in Salem was the hypocrisy of New England Puritanism. Massachusetts, as the Pilgrims made evident, was created as a religious sanctuary for those that faced fierce persecution in Europe. Plymouth had been at least mildly receptive of outside customs, both before and after Williams’ inhabitation. On the other hand, Salem imposed a very strict set of religious views upon its people, leaving little room for cultural diversification. For a colony as large as that of the Massachusetts Bay to contradict all that it once stood for must have baffled Williams, leading him to seek reform; even if it meant settling elsewhere in the New World. It was only right to accept people of all religious denominations, given that the Narragansett Indians elected to help the people of Rhode Island as willingly as the Wampanoag Indians did the Pilgrims.

The Pilgrims have long since been established as symbols of certain attributes, which James Baker lists in his guide to Historic Plymouth as, “Faith, Law, Education, Freedom and Morality” (Baker 114). Williams, a firm believer in such concepts, implemented them into the creation of his own governing system. Democracy may not have been a word commonly used or even appreciated in this era, but it is the closest term available to describe the manner in which Providence, Rhode Island was set up. They spoke of a government based on “mutual consent,” which meant by majority vote of “freemen” (Roger Williams Biography.”). The “freeman,” a term indicating the male head of each household, was the ultimate unit of political participation and power in Plymouth (Demos 6-7). Therefore, it is probable that Williams’ primary influence in this process was the Mayflower Compact, a governing doctrine enacted by the Plymouth Pilgrims. As the first of its kind in the New World, the Mayflower Compact was “viewed as a forerunner to the American Constitution” as it did indeed provide for “‘political authority [coming] from below not from above’ and enforced the principle that ‘government derives all of its authority from the consent of the governed’” (Deetz 20). Gradually, as more were able to vote, the form of democracy that exists in the United States today emerged, which continues to derive its power from and protect the rights of the people it was implemented to serve.

Shortly after the seeds of tolerance, freedom, and morality travelled upon the Mayflower to be sown in the soil of the Plymouth Colony, they blossomed and took root in Rhode Island, then finally spread across Colonial America to become cornerstones of a constitution that has thrived for the last 400 years. Roger Williams' Rhode Island citizens would adopt all that the Pilgrims represented during his time, including "piety, fortitude and dedication to hard work;" traits which embodied a set of ideals that placed Rhode Island above the elitist Puritan attitude of Massachusetts' corrupt hierarchy (Deetz 10). Throughout the founding of Rhode Island, Williams would reveal his most tangible legacies, each influenced by the religious dissenters of the Plymouth Colony. From his condemnation of New England Puritanism's oppressive orthodoxy, to the distinct separation of religion and government, each aspect of Rhode Island's Colonial structure can be traced to the passengers of the Mayflower. Most abiding of these however, is the precedent of cooperative, symbiotic relationships with those of other races, ethnicities, and cultures that Williams established. Roger Williams' steadfast perpetuation of the Pilgrims' social and democratic ideals in New England was imperative for the consequent birth of the diverse, progressive nation that the Pilgrims had envisioned and pursued.

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