



ROGER WILLIAMS FAMILY ASSOCIATION

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A HISTORY OF THE ROGER WILLIAMS NATIONAL MEMORIAL

When Providence was founded by Roger Williams in 1636, the plot of land which is now the Roger Williams National Memorial was a low-lying, marshy area bounded on the east by an Indian trail and on the west by the waters of the Great Salt Cove. The new town was first built on the east side of Towne Street—now called North Main—and on the west side, where the Memorial is now located, was the fresh water spring used by the original colonists. The first house was built on Memorial land in 1717 by Gabriel Bernon, Huguenot founder of the predecessor of St. John's Cathedral across the street. Access to the spring was reserved for the public, and in 1721 the spring was deeded to the townspeople forever.

By the mid-18th century, stores, craft shops, a school, a jail, and residences had sprung up on Memorial land on the west side of Towne Street. By the end of the century, Memorial property contained nearly two dozen houses, several gardens and stores, and four wharves extending into the cove on which tradesmen had built their shops—distilleries and cooperies probably engaged in triangle trade with the West Indies and Africa. Access to the waterfront was through narrow lanes, or "gangways," off of Towne Street. Despite this prosperity, the town's center of gravity was already moving southward, first to the area of the First Baptist Meeting House, and then across to "Weybosset Side." Larger bridges and the drawing of new harbor lines excluded shipping traffic from the Cove, and the urban maritime commerce that had filled the Memorial land shoreline relocated southward.

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, however, investment capital diversified from the high risk enterprise of sea trade to the labor-intensive outlets of manufacturing and transportation networks. The Blackstone Canal to Worcester, Mass. was undertaken in 1824, and 40-foot wide Canal Street was built atop a retaining wall along the eastern shore of the Cove. The Memorial ceased to be waterfront property. The rapid demise of the canal quickly followed the completion of the Providence and Worcester Railroad in 1847.

The railroads and canals were largely built with immigrant labor, and the changing composition of American population in the latter half of the 19th century was mirrored in the residency patterns of the Memorial land. The area became a mixture of commercial and multiple-dwelling structures, heavily rented by poorer immigrant groups. Successively into the 1920's, Irish, German, Italian, Russian Jewish, and Armenian residents and enterprises are recorded for this area.

In 1816 a house had been built on the spring property, and in 1875 the house was moved back directly on top of the spring as part of the widening of North Main Street. On both occasions, the spring water was channeled to pumps on nearby streets, but in 1900, a 264 year history of access to the spring by Providence citizenry was ended when the spring was diverted underground into the sewer system. A plaque was installed on the house in 1906 to commemorate the spring.

The neighborhood deteriorated in the ensuing years, with the decentralizing effect of the automobile and the construction of large scale commercial buildings on and near the plot. In 1930, Judge Jerome J. Hahn bought the house on the spring site, razed it, and donated the site to the city as a memorial to his father, the first Jewish citizen of Rhode Island to hold public office. A wall, steps, and a well curb designed by the esteemed Providence architect Norman Isham were completed in 1933, and provided a quiet retreat from what was then a crowded and heavily trafficked commercial area. In 1946, the Episcopal Diocese donated the 1/5 of an acre adjacent to the spring site that had been the home plot of Gabriel Bernon in 1717.

The first proposal for the present Memorial was made a quarter of a century ago, in 1959. Theodore Francis Green, in the last bill of his Senate career, proposed that a National Park honoring Roger Williams be established as an integral part of the restoration of the historic College Hill district. In 1965, with legislation re-introduced by Senator Claiborne Pell, Congress until December of 1974, however, that the Providence Redevelopment Authority, having condemned structures on the plot and cleared the land, sold the property to the National Park Service. Roy Weaver was appointed the Memorial's first superintendent.

Delays, and the consequent spiralling of costs, dogged the Memorial's development into the 1980's, but the time spent awaiting action was not entirely lost. Gray's Watch Shop, located 100 feet further up North Main Street, was moved to a new foundation on the Memorial plot at Smith Street was widened. By 1977, the outside and first floor of the building had been renovated and the structure, called the Antrim-Gray House after its major owners, was serving as the Memorial's office and Visitor Center.

In 1979, a Brown University team under government contract dug 12 feet below surface on a section of the Memorial grounds and reported on the archeological and historical significance of the area. The Antrim-Gray House also underwent historical investigation, dating the northern end of the building to at least the 1730's, and the southern section to the 1790's. The House has always been a multi-use building, containing both residences and—over the years—a restaurant, a dry goods, shop, an Italian barber shop, a liquor store, a dressmaker's shop, and a pool hall.

In 1980, the \$1.3 million now needed for the development of the park was approved by Congress through the efforts of Senator Pell, and the local firm of Albert Veri Associates was hired to design the landscaping of the Memorial. Phase I of landscaping, including plant beds and a ramp, was installed in 1980-81. Phase II, including earthwork, grass, and some of the walks and trees, took place in 1981. Phase III, including additional brick walkways, trees, and benches, was completed in 1983.

Since 1981, the Memorial's superintendent has been Larry Nash. In 1982, the second floor of the Antrim-Gray House was renovated, and the following year the ground floor was modified to allow for handicapped access. Ongoing work in the Memorial includes outdoor lighting to facilitate special events programs, and further interpretive exhibits in the Visitor Center. Future development will provide for an underground irrigation system.

The Memorial currently provides school and tour group programs which explain the significance of Roger Williams' principles and of the founding of Providence. The Visitor Center also functions as an information stop for tourists. The grounds have been used for special events, such as the kickoff celebration for the 350th anniversary of the state of Rhode Island, held this past June. Current usage of the park is estimated at 15,000 annually.

On October 8th, 1984, the Memorial was officially dedicated. The keynote address was given by Senator Claiborne Pell, who noted that in 1887, a pamphlet exhorting the healthfulness of an urban park space for Providence could well be describing the Roger Williams National Memorial today:

The slight good effect by fine parks placed in or towards the outskirts of a city is as nothing compared with what may be carried out by retaining and opening up interior spaces...A single acre of trees or grass in the heart of a city which may be reached by a few minutes walk when the labors of the day are over, is of more value than an area of 100 acres at such a distance as it can only be visited on an occasional holiday.

Michelle Jacques
Park Technician
Roger Williams National Memorial