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~Roger Williams National Memorial~

Interpretive Prospectus

INTERPRETIVE PROSPECTUS

ROGER WILLIAMS NATIONAL MEMORIAL

JULY 1979

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recommended by

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Introduction

Roger Williams National Memorial was authorized by Congress in 1965 "in commemoration of his outstanding contributions to the development of the principles of freedom in this country." Title to the property was conveyed to the National Park Service in 1974. A preliminary Master Plan delineating development alternatives was presented at a public meeting in 1975. Following public input, a new set of development alternatives was set forth in the Environmental Assessment of Development Concept Alternatives prepared in February 1977 by the North Atlantic Regional Office. An Environmental Review/ Negative Declaration, September 1977 outlined the development concept chosen for detailed project design.

This Interpretive Prospectus is for the purpose of delineating the content of the interpretive program in detail and recommending interpretive media to satisfy management objectives.

The Resource

The memorial site consists of 4.58 acres located in the center of Providence, Rhode Island, adjacent to the College Hill Historic District. Removal of non-historic structures has left a grassy lot occupied by one small building, the Antram-Gray Shop, which presently serves administrative, interpretive, and maintenance functions. The Roger Williams Spring/Hahn Memorial, a small park consisting of a landscaped court, a granite well supposed to be the location of the original spring, and memorial placques, has been retained. Gabriel Bernon Grove, approximately .2 acre, contains virtually the only trees on the site.

When Roger Williams established his "shelter for persons distressed for conscience" in 1636, the land which is now the Memorial was a marshy shore of the Moshassuck River in a wilderness known only to Indians who probably made use of the spring on the site. As the first town lots were laid out, the spring area was left as a town common, and was unoccupied until 1717. Before long, the little settlement in the wilderness was on its way to a prosperity which those who had fled to this place with little but their courage would have marveled at. The glittering social center which grew on the hill above the common remains today as an expression of what the zeal of New England's early settlers could accomplish when applied to worldly matters.

Roger Williams died in 1683 with a good deal less to his name than the property which now bears his name. His legacy to us is in the world of ideas and of the spirit, yet his thought and the example of his life were part of the foundation of all that would follow after.

The Story

The Puritan Context

Historians have differed widely in their use of the term Puritan. Some commentators restrict it to the more orthodox branches represented by Presbyterianism in England and Congregationalism in New England. Others are inclined to extend the term to embrace variations of the center and left of the movement, even to the Quakers.

All shared a dissatisfaction with the established church--the church established by Queen Elizabeth as the English answer to the problems created by the Reformation. The essence of Puritanism—what Cromwell called the "root of the matter"—is an experience of conversion which separates the Puritan from the mass of mankind and endows him with the privileges and duties of the elect.

The mission of the Puritan was to purify the church. Those who found the established church beyond hope became separatists--little groups of saints who met surreptitiously in each other's houses, or migrated to the Netherlands, or to the New World, as the Pilgrim Fathers did.

It would be a gross error to assume that those who sought religious freedom in the New World entertained, at the outset, any notion of permitting diversity of opinion in fundamentals. New England was to be a New Israel—a convenanted community. It was assumed that rightly informed consciences reach the same conclusions. The mission of the elect was to uphold orthodoxy. The external discipline of the group would involve, in John Winthrop's words "a due form of ecclesiastical and civil government."

Onto this stage entered the man who has been called the most provocative figure thrown upon the Massachusetts shores by the upheaval in England—Roger Williams.

Roger Williams--Seeker

Born in 1603, son of a London shopkeeper, Williams was educated at Charterhouse and Cambridge, thanks to the patronage of Sir Edward Coke. Forsaking the study of law for the ministry, he occupied a chaplaincy in a wealthy household, where he married one of the maids of the house. By this time, he had become a Puritan, rejecting Anglican ceremony and church government. In February of 1631, he arrived in Boston, where he was offered a ministry. He refused because the congregation had not explicitly separated from the Church of England. He lived in Plymouth for two years and was then called to the church in Salem in 1633. He immediately fell afoul of the regime of the colony by declaring that the royal charter gave no valid claim to the land, by denying that a magistrate could tender an oath of obedience to the unregenerate, by

continuing to insist that the churches profess separation, and asserting that the civil authority should not punish breaches of the first four Commandments. The General Court of Massachusetts Bay sentenced him to banishment. He made his way to Rhode Island--"sorely tossed for one fourteen weeks, in a bitter winter season, not knowing what bread or bed did mean"--there to found the settlement named Providence.

He lived by farming and trade with the Indians, whose friendship he won, enabling him to do heroic service for the rest of New England in the Pequot War of 1637.

As the Narragansett area filled up with a variety of settlers, Williams became the foremost citizen, although not with all inhabitants the most popular. In 1644 he obtained a royal charter for the colony.

For three years, 1654 to 1657, he served as "president" of the colony, which was always on the brink of disintegration due to dissension and rivalries. Thereafter he acted in various public capacities, constantly concerned with Indian affairs, and took part in King Phillip's war when he was well over seventy. He died impoverished in 1683.

The Separatists' Separatist

The events of Roger Williams' life cannot be understood without some inquiry into the journey of his mind. In nine-tenths of his opinions he saw eye-to-eye with the Cottons and Winthrops who banished him. He

had no ambition to found a democratic community; only reluctantly did he find himself involved in the temporal affairs that were an impediment to his quest for the true kingdom. In his search for purity in the church, he came to a point where he would take communion only with his wife. In correspondence with John Winthrop, Williams exhorted him to "abstract yourself with a holy violence from the dung heap of this earth." Having pursued separatism to its logical conclusion, he seems to have discovered that, while on earth, the dung heap could not be escaped; he therefore embraced it, by welcoming all who sought haven. He was a leader despite himself, a man with a commitment. Such men will always attract followers, even when the only thing the followers have in common is their refusal to be led.

What was the nature of this commitment? Williams had no quarrel with civil authority, indeed, he defended it vigorously against those who sought to use his own words to rebel against it. He had no interest in government beyond its power to ensure an atmosphere in which the righteous man could seek divine guidance. In 17th Century New England, however, this was demanding a good deal. The Massachusetts Bay Colony was a theocracy; civil authority was inseparable from church authority. As Cotton Mather said of Williams, "he was the first rebel against the divine church-order established in the wilderness." In Williams' opinion, enforcement of divine church-order by the state constituted a pollution of the church. To Williams' critics, his liberalism was even more absurd than his separatism. Williams had

concluded that a pure church was not attainable on this earth, consequently the only pure path was to continue to seek, but not expect to find, in this life, the incorporated fellowship of Christ. He had observed that no man can be so sure of any formulation of eternal truth as to have a right to impose on the mind and spirit of other men. His defense of the sovereign conscience put him in the painful position of having to defend religious ideals that were abhorrent to him. He clung to the thesis that virtue carries no right to impose, on others, one's own definitions.

Williams' dealings with the Indians are a revealing sidelight on the relationship between his philosophy and the experience of the American wilderness. Since all the world was a wilderness and all people were more or less unenlightened, the wilderness of America and its inhabitants were no different from London. Roger Williams regarded the Indians as equals in the eyes of God, to be dealt with accordingly. His early falling-out with the authorities of Massachusetts Bay was founded partly on his insistence that the Indians should be paid for land. In his insistence on respect for the Indians ownership of land, Williams was the first American anti-imperialist.

Living close to the Narragansett, and sometimes with them, he learned their tongue and published, in 1643, "A Key into the Language of America." Williams' place in history would be assured if he had

accomplished nothing beyond this volume. As the word "key" implies, it was an attempt to understand the character of the Indians as revealed in their language. Williams was one of the few Englishmen of his generation to treat the Indians with respect.

The Legacy of Roger Williams

In the three centuries since Williams was banished from Massachusetts, he has been regarded variously as the chief voice for the separation of church and state, and as a precursor of the democratic ideals of Jefferson and Lincoln. While exploring such a range of evaluations is beyond the scope of an Interpretive Prospectus, it does reveal the central question in assessing Williams' influence: was his argument with the authority of Massachusetts Bay, and his subsequent influence, purely religious; or is his legacy to us more in the political realm?

The question was a relatively easy one in the context of the Puritan colony. In a theocratic community, religious dissidence is tantamount to civil dissidence. Today, while religious freedom is still of concern, we no longer live in a theocratic society. Separation of church and state became embodied in the founding principles of the nation. From the perspective of the framers of the Constitution, the emphasis was upon insulating government from the influence of established religion. Roger Williams' concern was to insulate religion from pollution by government. The effect may be the same, but the distinction is important.

In our time, the issue is clearly seen in such questions as aid to parochial schools and in the Supreme Court decision on prayer in public schools. More recently, the activities of certain sects or "cults" have gained public notice. (A "cult" may be defined as somebody else's curious beliefs). In some cases, the economic activities of a group may appear to go beyond the boundaries of acceptable church practice. Other groups are charged with having "brain-washed" followers. If such matters come to the attention of the courts, the state may be placed in the dangerous position of having to decide what constitutes a bona fide religion. It might be argued that a proper function of the state is to protect the individual's capacity for free choice, but is it possible to separate this from interference with free choice? Wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth unto destruction.

Certainly the relationship between church and state is a lively enough issue in itself to insure Williams' importance to succeeding generations. Yet, there is sufficient indication of direct influence of the Puritan theorists on the thinking of the founding fathers to inquire into the applicability of Williams' thought in other spheres. Therefore, the question remains, what in Williams' legacy speaks most urgently to the current generation of Americans?

First, Williams proclaimed for all time the inviolability of the individual consicence. He proclaimed that the individual's search for truth was no business of the state. The conflict arises in the

exercise of conscience. A conscientious man is by definition one who acts according to his conscience. In today's terms, if a man decides that the payment of war taxes, or the draft, or abortion, are matters of conscience, then his ideas, once they become acts, are the concern of civil authority. To the authorities of Massachusetts, Williams represented a threat to security, since his agitation was heard by other colonists and by England. Today, there are few more urgent questions than the alleged threat to national security posed by freedom of thought and information. The concept of privacy is eroded daily by seemingly benevolent concentrations of information in business and government. Such rationalization of the social structure threatens the inviolability of that last refuge of conscience that Williams defended.

The Puritans brought to the New World a notion of the perfectability of man, and therefore of his institutions. In the virgin soil of America, where everything seemed possible, this idea of perfectability took root, and guides much of our national energy today. Now, to be sure, golden plans for man's perfection seem to come more loudly from social planners and scientists than from seekers after a new Zion, but their plans sound much the same; lay aside your contentiousness, they say. Only in the standardization of a perfect plan can all find fulfillment. No one among the Puritans sought perfection more intensely than Roger Williams, but he observed that those who impose an order become absorbed with the imposition. Williams would remind

us that, however he identifies it, each man must find eternal truth in the light of his own conscience.

The Plan

Interpretive Center

The development concept for the memorial makes provision for an additional structure for interpretive purposes. The interpretive planning team felt that visitors needs for the foreseeable future could be met in the Antram/Gray House, with administrative offices moved to the second floor and restrooms into a small addition to the building. This would create an adequate space for an audiovisual area and exhibits. Proposals in this plan are based upon use of the existing structure. If for some reason it is still necessary to construct another building, media proposals would be basically the same. The full range of maintenance and administrative needs must be weighed before a determination can be made as to the need for an additional building.

Factors Influencing Choice of Media

There are very few artifacts related to Roger Williams in existence, and none in the park collection. Some visual materials -- documents and drawings -- lend themselves to exhibit purposes, but would require considerable accompanying narrative to convey any of the story.

Although the events of Roger Williams' life are significant, and warrant some treatment, the events are merely the result of working out of his ideas, presumably the most difficult area for interpretation. The purpose of interpretation is to stimulate thought, however, and it seems most

appropriate in a memorial whose significance revolves around ideas. Moreover, confrontation of ideas is an essential element. In the perspective of three centuries, the theosophical debates of the Puritans may seem cool and detached, and their lives likewise. On the contrary, they were passionate in their rationality; the war against sin was a very real struggle to them.

Audio-Visual

A comfortable seating area will be provided in a portion of the first floor of the Antram/Gray Shop, with appropriate decor suggestive of the period. Seating will be movable, perhaps simple benches which can be put aside for school groups to assemble on the carpet. A video installation will present an 8-10 minute program introducing Williams' essential significance with a minimum of historical exposition. It will simply state that Roger Williams, who had come to America to pursue religious freedom, had found it necessary to quit the community of his fellow seekers for the same reason. His relationship with the Indians, his differences with church leaders, and the circumstances of the haven for those oppressed of conscience can be touched upon in relating the progress of his thinking. The program might take the form of one actor impersonating Williams, writing letters to his friends and detractors and speaking paraphrases of his ideas directly to the viewer. In any case, Williams will be represented entirely in the context of his times, leaving to the follow-up an inquiry into the applicability of his thinking to our times.

The essential second phase of the program is the invitation to the visitors to consider and discuss the implications of what they have seen. The park interpreter will serve as catalyst for this discussion. Without assuming a position on issues, he can mention current matters of church/state relationship, as well as broader applications. This program combination is essential. Roger Williams can be presented most forcefully, and the danger of interpreting history backward avoided, in this manner. Including contemporary references in the audiovisual program would cause it to become dated quickly. More importantly, visitors must be stimulated to probing such applications themselves. The essence of the matter is individual conscience, and it is individual conscience which must be called upon.

Exhibits

As mentioned above, there are few artifacts related to Roger Williams. This is not a serious deficiency, since Williams was little concerned with worldly goods. However, some archeological material, if located on site development, would aid in creating a period feeling for the site. If Williams' will is located, it might list some items of which reproductions would accomplish the same purpose. One item thought to have been owned by Williams would be worthwhile reproducing. That is a compass/sundial he supposedly carried. This object shows that Williams' concern with finding his way in the wilderness was a practical, as well as an intellectual enterprise.

Other items which lend themselves to exhibit use are the Indian Land Deed of 1638, and the "town lot" map which not only puts the spring site in perspective of the time, but also illustrates Williams' approach to assigning property. The arrangement was democratic and differs from other New England towns centered around the established church. The Providence Compact of 1637 likewise delineates tersely the agreement of the inhabitants to orders "only in civil things." A representative portion of the "Key into the Language of America" would be interesting in itself and indicative of Williams' relationship with Indians. Such items would be exhibited in conjunction with original art work representing some of the main points made in the audiovisual program.

Wayside Exhibits

The Roger Williams Spring/Hahn Memorial was established in 1933 to provide a formalized setting for the original fresh water source of the Providence settlement. The property was given to the city by Judge J. Jerome Hahn in memory of his father, the first citizen of Jewish faith elected to office by Providence voters. A wayside exhibit here will interpret the significance of the spring site as well as the principle of religious toleration symbolized by the memorial.

Gabriel Bernon Grove memorializes the first person to take up residence on the spring site. Bernon was a Huguenot refugee instrumental in establishing St. John's Episcopal Church. A wayside exhibit will mention the reservation of the use of the

spring by all citizens and Bernon as representative of those seeking religious freedom.

Site design will create other opportunities for on-site interpretation. Since these would not be related to any specific feature, with the possible exception of a reference to the churches visible from the site and the path to the old State House, such devices would not be wayside "exhibits" in the conventional sense. As an extension of the memorial's function of encouraging contemplation of Roger Williams' ideas, however, something on the order of placques containing quotes, located at benches, would be appropriate. These need not be restricted to quotations by Roger Williams, but could embody his ideas as expressed by others. A Wayside Exhibit Plan will analyze these needs more thoroughly in relation to site design. For the purpose of programming funds, it is estimated that approximately six to eight such exhibits would be needed.

Publications

The Cathedral House Book Store, directly across the street from the Visitor Center, sells a number of pertinent publications, therefore, it would seem inappropriate for the memorial to engage in a competitive operation. However, the Visitor Center could serve as an outlet for the book store. An additional service to visitors would be an annotated bibliography. Eventually, a handbook should be produced

to meet the Memorial's needs. The Memorial will continue to distribute the College Hill Guide and other appropriate publications related to Providence.

Cost Estimates

		Planning		Production
Museum Exhibits	(51)	$18,000	(52)	$90,000
Audiovisual	(61)	15,000	(62)	75,000
Wayside Exhibits		--------(55) $15,000--------		

Study Team

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LEGISLATIVE COMPLIANCE

All actions proposed in this plan must comply with the provisions of Section 106 of the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act and Executive Order 11593 as codified in the Regulations of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (36 CFR Part 800). Prior to a decision to implement any provisions of this plan, these regulations require that all cultural resources in or near the project areas must be identified and evaluated in terms of the National Register Criteria of Eligibility. The evaluation must be done by appropriate professionals for the Regional Director in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer. Additionally, the Criteria of Effect and the Criteria of Adverse Effect (36 CFR Part 800.3a and b) must be applied by appropriate professionals for the Regional Director in consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer and the Advisory Council Procedures completed as appropriate.

JUN 28 1979

United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

ROGER WILLIAMS NATIONAL MEMORIAL
P.O. BOX 367, ANNEX STATION
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02901

IN REPLY REFER TO:

June 25, 1979

MEMORANDUM

To: Chief, Division of Interpretive Planning, Harpers Ferry Center

From: Superintendent, Roger Williams National Memorial

Subject: Interpretive Prospectus, ROWI

I have reviewed the Draft Interpretive Prospectus and find it quite adequate. Please convey my appreciation to team members Soubier, Brown, Jones and Strand.

Roy W. Weaver

United States Department of the Interior

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NORTH ATLANTIC REGION
15 STATE STREET
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02109

IN REPLY REFER TO:

K-1817
NAR(OI)

July 6, 1979

Memorandum

To: Manager, Harpers Ferry Center
Attention: Dr. Alan Kent

JUL 11 1979

From: Acting Regional Director, North Atlantic Region

Subject: Approval of Interpretive Prospectus

We hereby approve the Interpretive Prospectus for Roger Williams National Memorial. Please express our appreciation to all the team members involved.

Gilbert W. Calhoun

Enclosure