

Providence Plantations: The Real History



Rhode Island state seal on the governor's podium as of June 24, patched up with masking tape to remove reference to "Providence Plantations" pursuant to her executive order two days earlier. (Photo: Michael Bilow)

"Rhode Island and Providence Plantations" has been the official full name of the state since the colonial era, created by the unification of the original "four towns," which in order of their dates of founding were Providence (1636), Pocasset/Portsmouth (1638), Newport (1639), and Shawomet/Warwick (1642). In 1643/1644, the towns were combined under their current name into a single governmental entity by letters patent from the English Parliament.

On June 22, Gov. Gina Raimondo announced that she would, by executive order, shorten the name to "State of Rhode Island" on documents and displays wherever she had the authority to do it, ironically speaking at a podium emblazoned with the state seal still retaining "Providence Plantations." (Two days later, the seal was temporarily patched up with masking tape.) I covered her presentation and posted a full video recording for *Motif* ([facebook.com/watch/live/?v=721721038645901](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=721721038645901)). She also supported asking voters to formally change the name by constitutional amendment at the November election, although that was overwhelmingly rejected in 2010.

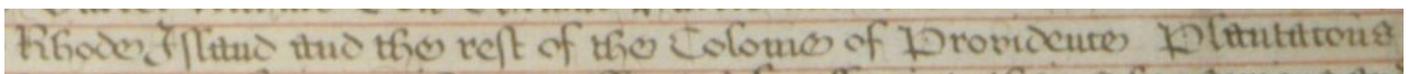
The word "plantation" has come to be associated with Southern slavery, where first tobacco in the 1700s and later cotton in the 1800s were the cash crops that formed the basis of the entire regional economy, an agricultural engine entirely dependent upon vast quantities of slave labor, the larger operations requiring hundreds of enslaved people. By the 1860s, as the North grew into the world's industrial powerhouse with factories, railroads, telegraph lines, and consequent wealth, the South remained trapped by its addiction to a feudal system that benefited a few who owned land and slaves but prevented the development of modernity and a middle class, and eventually those privileged few were desperate enough to preserve their own interests that they plunged the nation into a bloody civil

war lasting four years, 1861-1865, with a cost of 600,000 lives lost.

As Raimondo stated in her Executive Order 20-48, “many of the State’s residents find it painful that a word so closely associated with slavery should appear in the official name of the State.” The current objection to the word “plantation” is based upon visceral upset, not history. I’ve come to see it like the swastika: no matter how true it is that the symbol is 2,500 years old and the word “swastika” literally means in Sanskrit “there is well-being,” its adoption in 1920 by Adolf Hitler makes it impossible today to see a swastika without one’s first thought being of Nazism. As I noted elsewhere, the Boy Scouts started using the swastika on badges and medals in 1911, but stopped in 1934 shortly after the Nazis got into power in Germany. Beyond some threshold that has been crossed by both the swastika and the word “plantation,” the symbolism becomes irredeemably infected with evil, regardless of the true history, but it is worth understanding that history.

The word “plantation” had no such association with slavery in the 1630s: it was in common use by 1610 to suggest both the idea of “planting” a colony that would grow and “planting” crops in a way that would prove economically productive; the earliest use of the word to describe a large farm of the kind needing slaves is not found until 1706. The founder of Providence, Roger Williams, had a background in the law courts of England, having clerked for the most famous lawyer and judge of the day, Edward Coke, and their relationship took on the character almost of father and son, Coke thinking so highly of Williams’ ability that he paid for his formal education. Coke was so influential that he was cited and quoted, 130 years after his death, by the American revolutionaries arguing the invalidity of the Stamp Act and writing the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, the latter incorporating ideas first enunciated by Coke such as the right to remain silent and the right to be secure against warrantless searches and seizures. Coke’s legal radicalism was echoed by Williams who broke with ancient traditions of English practice in founding Providence: he insisted that land could not be acquired by force through “right of discovery” and instead the Native American Indians should be paid for it, he insisted that the governor and officers of the colony should be chosen by popular vote at annual elections rather than being appointed from London, and — most famously — he insisted that individuals would have full liberty of religious conscience and should be subject only to the civil law.

But Coke, until he fell out of royal favor and spent the rest of his life in parliamentary opposition, was the ultimate establishment lawyer, serving as the king’s prosecutor against both Walter Raleigh and Guy Fawkes. As England began to dominate commercial seafaring, in 1622 the king created what is commonly known as the “Board of Trade,” but whose official name remains to this day, almost 400 years later, “The Lords of the Committee of the Privy Council appointed for the consideration of all matters relating to Trade and Foreign Plantations.” Put more simply, “plantation” was the business buzzword of the early 1600s culture of economic imperialism in which Coke and Williams were enmeshed. When the parliamentary charter was finally replaced in 1663 by a royal charter, it recognized “our Island called Rhode Island and the rest of the Colonie of Providence Plantations.”



Detail “Rhode Island and the rest of the Colonie of Providence Plantations” in the Charter of 1663 by King Charles II.

Rhode Island never had large farms on the scale of slave plantations in the South, but it certainly did have slaves. House Speaker Nicholas Mattiello attracted quite a lot of attention when he questioned that fact in a radio interview on Friday, June 19: “Quite frankly, I have to educate myself, because I originally did not think we had actual slavery in Rhode Island, and that may not be accurate.” The

Providence Journal reported that he was “forced to backpedal.” Before we pile onto the public ridicule of Mattiello as an ignoramus, it is worth quoting Joanne Pope Melish (whose PhD is from Brown) in her 1998 book, *Disowning Slavery*:

In Connecticut in the 1950s, when I was growing up, the only slavery discussed in my history textbook was southern; New Englanders had marched south to end slavery. It was in Rhode Island, where I lived after 1964, that I first stumbled across an obscure reference to local slavery, but almost no one I asked knew anything about it. Members of the historical society did, but they assured me that slavery in Rhode Island had been brief and benign, involving only the best families, who behaved with genteel kindness. They pointed me in the direction of several antiquarian histories, which said about the same thing. Some of the people of color I met knew more.

But Rhode Island didn't just have slaves, it had disproportionately more than the other New England colonies. In the definitive classic on the subject, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, Lorenzo Greene in 1942 gave specific numbers. (This was his PhD dissertation at Columbia, and it was reprinted in 1968 and 2016.) “The unusually large number of Negroes in Rhode Island late in the eighteenth century is evidence of the colony's enormous commercial activities which produced a relatively large slave-holding aristocracy,” Greene wrote. There was slavery in the colony by 1652: we know this with certainty because Rhode Island needed to outlaw it on May 18 of that year, limiting indentured servitude to a term of 10 years (or age 24 if started before age 14); the evidence is that this legal prohibition was widely ignored and never enforced, and regardless was superceded by a 1703 law that officially authorized slavery.

During the 1600s, most slavery in New England, including Rhode Island, was of Native American Indians, reaching a climax after King Philip's War in 1675-1676, which historians today view as a civil war involving complicated internecine competition among various English settlers and indigenous tribes over resources such as land. Some tribes, including the Wampanoag, Nipmuck, Narragansett, and Pocumtuck fought against the English settlers, while other tribes, including the Mohegan and Mohawk, fought with the English settlers. Importantly, Rhode Island remained neutral, refusing to join the New England Confederation of English settlers from Massachusetts Bay Colony, New Haven Colony, Plymouth Colony, and Connecticut Colony. As I explained in a review of *God, War, and Providence* by James A. Warren (motifri.com/summer2018-nonfiction) —

The British colonists looked back helplessly with increasing alarm as the home country descended into civil war in the 1640s and the interregnum of the 1650s, and the neighboring settlements in Massachusetts and Connecticut saw the Rhode Island settlers as anarchist heretics and the native tribes as recalcitrant heathen savages. As the other colonies subjugated and Christianized the tribes, Williams and the Narragansetts formed a military and social alliance that well served their mutual goal of remaining independent: “For their part, the Puritan authorities viewed Williams' Rhode Island as a cesspool of religious and political radicalism, and the stubborn Narragansetts as both a serious security risk and an obstacle to Puritan expansion.” This book is the story of how that unique confluence happened.

Seen at the time as an existential conflict by all parties, Providence was burned to the ground and numerous battles and skirmishes killed both settlers and natives with what is believed to have been the highest per capita death toll of any North American military conflict (including the 1861-1865 American Civil War in second place). On Aug 14, 1676, two days after King Philip (Metacom) was killed, effectively ending the war, a town meeting in Providence authorized a commission, including Roger Williams, to sell the captured natives into indentured servitude for limited numbers of years ranging from children under age 5 who would be freed at age 30 and those older than age 30 who would be freed after 7 years, technically not breaking the law against slavery then in effect, although it was clearly understood that many, especially those destined to be transported to the Caribbean, would be unlikely to survive long enough to reach freedom even if the terms were honored. Nevertheless, this was explicitly not chattel slavery of the kind that would be practiced centuries later, especially because the children of the indentured servants were not themselves bound. Several considerations probably motivated this action, including a desire to use proceeds from sales to compensate those, including Williams, who suffered property losses incurred in the destruction of the city, but also to avoid setting the captives free where they could, the settlers feared, resume the war. Some of the tribes who sided with the settlers during the war acquired captives from the defeated tribes as slaves.

In 1708, according to Greene, the population of the colony was 7,181, including 426 black and 56 white "servants." Greene assumes that all of the black "servants" were actually slaves, which is probably correct, especially because the black population is concentrated in the ports where the slave trading ships were based: Newport had a total population of 2,203, including 220 black and 20 white "servants," while Providence had a total population of 1,446, including 7 black and 6 white "servants." Unless Greene is correct about the black "servants" being either entirely or at least overwhelmingly slaves, it is difficult to understand why the black population of Newport was 9.9% but of Providence was 0.4%. Both the black and white population increased substantially during the 1700s, with the black population 9.1% in 1730, 9.3% in 1749, and 11.5% in 1755, about double that of other New England states. The percentage black population declined to 6-7% between 1774 and 1790. Why the decrease? In part because, during the American Revolution, the British offered freedom to any slave who could escape to their lines, an effort to sabotage the revolutionist economy.

Although Rhode Island had slaves, the numbers were tiny compared to the rest of North America. A large slave-holding estate in rural southern Rhode Island might have 40 slaves, and there were only a handful of such estates; in the Southern states, a single estate could have hundreds of slaves. Where Rhode Island stood out was the triangular trade: sugar to New England, rum to Africa, slaves to the American South and the Caribbean; before the revolution the merchants of Rhode Island controlled between 60% and 90% of the trade in African slaves, but few slaves passed through its ports because of the nature of the trade. Of an estimated 10 million slaves abducted from Africa, about a half million (5%) were brought to what is now the United States, and most were brought to the Caribbean and Latin America.

By 1784, Rhode Island enacted a law that provided for the gradual emancipation of slaves, so children born to slaves would no longer be property of their masters but instead would be temporary "apprentices," girls becoming free at 18 and boys at 21. Although there were about 4,400 blacks in Rhode Island in 1790, by 1800 the number of slaves was 384 and by 1840 only 5. What happened to freed slaves? The traditional New England custom of "warning out" anyone poor and indigent so they did not become a public charge was practiced by many towns: in 1750, only 5% of those "warned out" were black, but this rose to 22% by 1790 and 50% by 1800; those exiled from towns were not strangers, as 37% had lived there for at least five years and 26% for at least 10 years. Finally, with its 1843

constitution following the Dorr Rebellion, the state adopted abolition with a single sentence: "Slavery shall not be permitted in this state."

Rhode Island has an ugly and shameful history with slavery, but none of that has to do with "plantations" in its official name.