

Even the most bitter accusers of Roger Williams recognized in him that combination of charm, confidence, and intensity which a later age would call charisma. They did not regard such traits as assets, however, for those traits only made him more popular and thus increased the danger of the errors he preached in this, the Massachusetts Bay colony. With such a one as he, they could not compromise.

For Williams's part, neither his benevolent intelligence nor his Christian charity made him willing to compromise either. The error, he believed, was not his, and when convinced he was right he backed away from no one. His mentor Sir Edward Coke, once chief justice of England and arguably the greatest jurist in English history, had taught him that; when King James had declared himself ruler by divine right and above the law, Coke had contradicted him to his face. For that, the king had rewarded him with rooms in the Tower of London.

That precedent made the conflict between Williams and his accusers inevitable and thickened it with history, a history that stretched back long before Coke's defiance. And if the conflict began far distant in both space and time from Massachusetts, crossing both an ocean and centuries, it first came to a head there, in the cold New England winter of 1636. Its repercussions would be immense.

The Massachusetts authorities and Williams would have it out over their great dispute, but they would not settle it, nor is it settled now. For their dispute defined for the first time two fault lines that have run continuously through four hundred years of American history, fault lines which remain central to defining the essential nature of the United States of America today.

The first was the more obvious: the proper relation between what man has made of God—the church—and the state. The second was the more subtle: the proper relation between a free individual and the state—the shape of liberty, the form American individualism would take. What Williams had largely already learned in England would lead him to prophesy the former; what happened to him that winter and after would lead him to articulate the latter.

No conflict was anticipated when Williams first arrived in Boston in January 1631 aboard the *Lyon*, a vessel which carried far more than him and a few other passengers. Its captain, William Peirce, had sailed in dead winter, the worst and rarest time to cross the North Atlantic, to keep a promise.

Less than a year earlier a fleet had carried nearly one thousand men and women to Massachusetts. They were not adventurers. They were like-minded Puritans who considered themselves loyal to the Church of England but disgusted with what they regarded as its corrupt practices, yet the crown and that church were putting intense pressure on them to conform to those practices. To escape that pressure, traveling as whole families and often with their neighbors, they had removed themselves from England and, with determination and purpose, had planted themselves in the wild that

was America. As they embarked from England, Governor John Winthrop had reminded them of that purpose, stating that they would plant a “citty upon a hill” dedicated to God, obeying God’s laws, and flourishing in God’s image.

But they did not flourish and God did not bless them. Indeed, within a few months roughly a quarter of the entire population had died or was dying, starvation threatened the rest, many were fleeing back to England, and nearly all wondered if they had done right.

Anticipating that winter would utterly exhaust their resources, Winthrop had months earlier charged Peirce with resupplying the plantation. Peirce’s return brought more than food, supplies, or even hope; he brought deliverance and, seemingly, a sign that the settlers had done right in leaving England, a sign that God had used the hard times merely to test the settlers’ resolve. As the *Lyon* unloaded, Winthrop therefore declared a colony-wide day of thanksgiving and prayer.

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