



HISTORY  
OF  
PHILIP'S WAR  
COMMONLY  
THE GREAT INDIAN WAR

# Staging a Revolution: The Complex History of Turning Thoughts into Actions

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*Our ideals are our better selves. –Amos Bronson Alcott*

In 2026 the United States will be marking its 250th anniversary. We will hear repeatedly about what happened in 1776. Those of us in New England might commonly start the story in 1773 with the Boston Tea Party. And some scholars might situate the events of the American Revolution into patterns of thought and action in the 1770s. All of this is very valuable, but it does not answer the question of when the origins of Revolutionary thought and ideals become recognizable.

By the time of the tea parties, which happened throughout the colonies, individuals and communities up and down the Eastern Seaboard had been experimenting with revolutionary, even radical ideas, since the days of the earliest colonial settlers. They built their homesteads on lands occupied from time immemorial by a complex collection of Indigenous nations. Perhaps nowhere was this experiment more on display than in the small colony of Rhode Island.

In 1636, Roger Williams was banished by the Massachusetts and Plymouth Bay Colonies and made his way south. Trudging through the winter weather on trading paths and uncleared forests, he made his first home on the bucolic eastern shore of a river that emptied into a large, protected bay. He did not realize that this land, which he believed to be in the hands of the Pokanoket, was claimed by Plymouth. English leaders counseled Williams to keep moving out of their jurisdiction or face return to England and likely death by hanging. Luckily, through years of farming and trading with local Indigenous peoples, he developed a facility with the Indigenous languages and dialects of the region. He counted members of the Pokanoket, and the even larger Narragansett Nation, as friends. The leaders of these communities welcomed him and allowed him to settle on the fertile lands along the riverfront in what would become the town of Providence.

If students learn anything about Roger Williams beyond his settlement of Providence, they might hear about the reasons for his banishment. He is often portrayed as being less religious than the Puritans of Massachusetts. This could not be further from the truth. Williams was not only deeply devout, but also committed to the idea of living what one believed. He had no stomach for what he saw as the hypocrisy of many Puritans who settled this land only to become a new version of the tyrants from which they had fled. His continued calls for a true break from the Church of England and from what he saw as an overstepping of the British crown made the Bay colonies politically vulnerable. They could not tolerate his presence if he did not fall into line.

The colony that he established with both like-minded and also otherwise-minded men and women was based on the ideal of tolerance. Williams, who had come of age during a time of religious unrest and persecution in England, held his faith dearly and wanted others to be able to do the same. It is in this small town, in a small colony, in which we see the separation of church and state and religious tolerance not merely espoused, but first practiced in the colonies. And the word “practice” is quite important. It was not easy, nor was it necessarily “natural,” to expect people of profound difference to live among one another; it took constant work and a willingness to learn and understand others’ languages and cultures. But it was a worthy ideal on which to base a colony, a “lively experiment.”<sup>1</sup>

Nearly 400 years of practice have taught us that ideals are often at odds with reality. It is crucial to understand how revolutionary experiments unfolded differently for different peoples and to ask ourselves what we can learn from the mistakes and shortcomings of the past. We will see, repeatedly, that one group’s gain appears to require another’s loss. But need that be the case?

<sup>1</sup> C. Morgan Grefe, “Roger Williams and the Founding of Rhode Island,” *EnCompass*, Rhode Island Historical Society, accessed January 2, 2023. <http://library.providence.edu/encompass/roger-williams-and-the-founding-of-rhode-island/>.





*The Banishment of Roger Williams, c. 1850. Painted by P. F. Rothermel over 200 years after Roger Williams' banishment from Massachusetts and Plymouth Bay Colonies, the artist has imagined Williams striding through dense woodland in winter. Rhode Island Historical Society (1943.3.1)*

By examining moments of conflict, we can often best see ideals at work. Who were the true believers, and who used the rhetoric for personal gain? When ideals conflicted with economic prosperity, could a community bargain with or suspend its ideals and still claim them?

After spending four months reading, writing, and participating in classes online, educators from across the country came together in Providence in July 2022 to explore these questions with the help of some of the best scholars, public historians, and repositories in the region. What follows in this resource book are their explorations in the form of lesson plans. But first, let us look at the key elements of those revolutionary ideals with which we grappled in 2022.

## RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

The migration of Puritan settlers across the Atlantic is often miscast as being a search for “religious freedom.” This was not the case for most. More properly seen as people fleeing from religious persecution, the migration was about establishing a colony or colonies in which the Pilgrims and Puritans could worship as they chose. This “freedom” was not, nor was it intended to be, extended to those who did not support the church created by these Separatists from the Church of England.

For a time, those who disagreed with the Puritans managed to live in the community, but for some individuals, this became problematic quickly. When Roger Williams arrived in 1634, settlers greeted him with much fanfare, expecting great things from this devout and well-educated man. It did not occur to them that his principles and determination might, in fact, outmatch theirs. Unlike his new neighbors, he *did* believe in the separation of the sacred church from the mundane role of government.

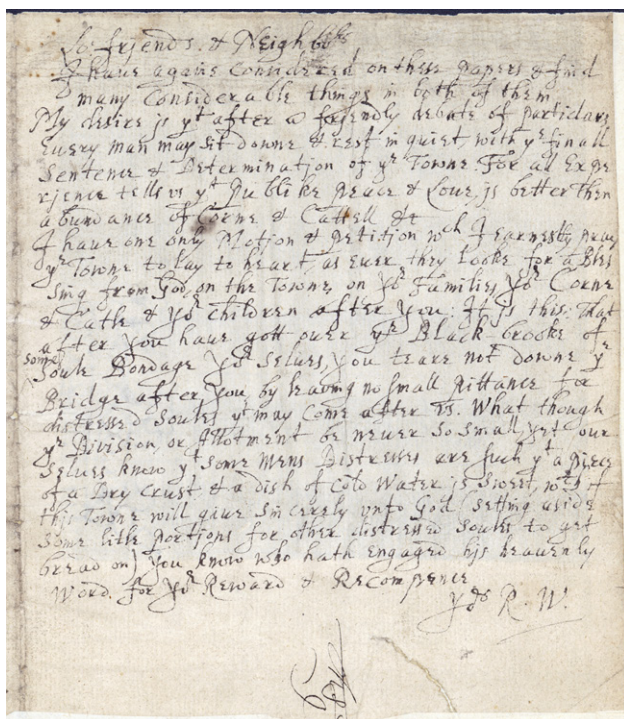
Within a year, Puritan leaders were calling Williams's actions into question, and indictments soon followed. He moved from Boston to Salem to Plymouth but still could not reconcile what he believed with the actions of local leaders. Nor could these same leaders tolerate Williams's outspoken dissent. Soon, they banished him for holding and espousing new and dangerous opinions.

Williams fought for religious tolerance and a codified separation of church and state, first by seeking and obtaining a parliamentary patent that addressed only civil life and, later, through publications, letters, and ultimately, the Royal Charter of 1663.

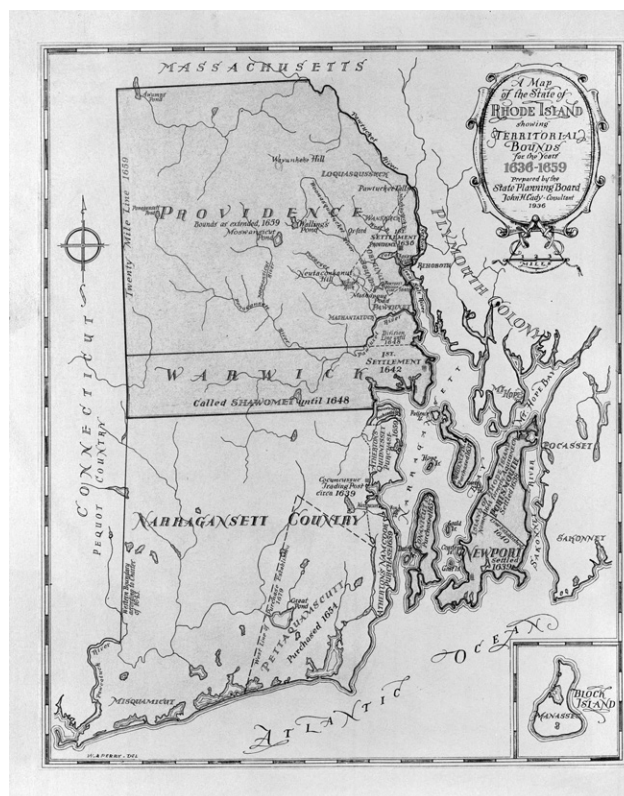
The 1663 Charter was a fundamental building block of Rhode Island and became a foundation for the new nation. It was an ideal that tested, and continues to test, individual and collective action in the United States. It is often questioned, sometimes reinterpreted, but always present in our understanding of our founding—far before the War for Independence.

## COLONIAL SETTLEMENT AND INDIGENOUS NATIONS

Indigenous life on this continent occurred within a dynamic environment of exchange from time immemorial. Peoples forming different nations and cultures lived on these lands and cultivated particular ways of life that included specific beliefs, customs, practices, and governance structures. For decades, men of European ancestry fished the Atlantic, coming ashore to exchange goods with local Indigenous communities. Soon, others moved into the interior to trap game. All exploited what were once plentiful resources, often leaving behind material goods and, even more significantly, disease.



Letter from Roger Williams to the Town of Providence, urging the town meeting to not deny those seeking to purchase land rights, reminding them that Providence was supposed to be a place for all persons of distressed conscience, c. early 1661/62. Rhode Island Historical Society (MSS 808 Folder 20).



A map of the State of Rhode Island showing territorial bounds for the years 1636-1659, prepared by the State Planning Board, John H. Cady, Consultant, 1936. Rhode Island Historical Society (Cartography Collection).

The degree to which disease killed the Indigenous peoples of the Northeast coast is debated in the scholarship today, but it does appear that disease and dislocation reduced the strength of many Indigenous nations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, even as more full-scale colonial settlements were formed by the British and Dutch.<sup>2</sup>

What is not open for debate is that the peoples of this land were here when Puritan settlement began and that members of these Indigenous Nations remain vital members of our communities today. As students of history, we must strive to learn the history of the complex Indigenous peoples of North America. And we must also study how the ideals brought and articulated by European settlers ignored, at best, and ravaged, at worst, the original peoples of this land.<sup>3</sup>

But, how do we reconcile this nation's founding ideals with its violent and painful past?

Moreover, as you explore these lessons, you will see that Indigenous ideals also influenced the thinking of these foreign settlers and subsequent generations. Should not the authors of those ideals be included in our compendium of revolutionary thought and practice?

## RHODE ISLAND, THE TRANSATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE, AND ENSLAVEMENT

No matter how expansive or inclusive an ideal is, it can have unintended consequences. Some historians have argued that the absence of a state church in early Rhode Island that could levy a tithe on its residents led to individuals having more capital to invest in their other interests. This meant a greater accumulation of personal wealth and encouraged a culture of individualism in which people could focus more on their own interests than those of the community around them, which Williams spoke out against as early as the 1650s.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Pinar Durgun, "Before Rhode Island: Early Peoples and Archaeology," *EnCompass*, Rhode Island Historical Society, accessed January 2, 2023. <http://library.providence.edu/encompass/before-rhode-island-early-peoples-and-archaeology/>.

<sup>3</sup> Lorén Spears, "Narragansett History," *EnCompass*, Rhode Island Historical Society, accessed January 2, 2023. <http://library.providence.edu/encompass/narragansett-history/>.

<sup>4</sup> William G. McLoughlin, *Rhode Island: A History*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1986, 33.



As such, beginning at the end of the seventeenth century, as Rhode Island sought to gain more financial stability, its merchants speculated in all aspects of trade, including what would become a defining feature of Rhode Island's economy: the transatlantic slave trade, the related activities of rum production, and the provisioning of the staple crop economies of the West Indies.

Enslaved people of African descent lived and worked in the colony of Rhode Island. In fact, for a time, Rhode Island had the highest percentage of enslaved people of any New England colony.<sup>5</sup>

These stark statistics show us the reality of an ideal turned on its head. With a foundation in tolerance and welcome, this "Lively Experiment" distorted into the ugliest forms of individualism. Its history of enslavement and the slave trade were a founding hypocrisy that, like the separation of church and state, would be passed down to the new nation.

But does not living up to lofty ideals negate the exemplar? Rhode Island is, of course, not alone in its participation in this original sin, but its scale offers us the opportunity to understand more deeply and intimately what happens when ideals are placed into our profoundly imperfect human hands.

## WOMEN AND EARLY RADICAL THOUGHT

As is the case with peoples of Indigenous and African descent, the written record of women, even literate and monied women, is scant. Perhaps the best-known woman in colonial New England is Anne Hutchinson, widely considered to be the only female founder of a colony. And yet, no writings from Hutchinson survive. We must turn to court transcripts, defaming stories, and other private journal entries to piece together the pivotal year before Hutchinson came to Portsmouth.

As we seek Hutchinson's ideas through her actions and the words of others, we must ask if her gender worked, in some ways, to her favor. We can learn how women developed trust in one another and how they navigated a changing society that was simultaneously belittling of and threatened by them.

Rhode Island, as is likely clear by now, was a different sort of place. Those ideals espoused by Williams, which centered on the individual's right to worship as they saw fit, extended to women. And on this ideal, he was good to his word, as seen in the landmark case, *Joshua Verin v. Providence Plantations*. This early court case, related to a husband keeping his wife from her church, demonstrates that the commitment to any person's right to uninhibited worship trumped traditional gender norms.<sup>6</sup>

Joseph Nath,  
Benoni Pearce,  
Benjamin Cushing, jun.  
Newport, July 6, 1764.  
Just imported in the Sloop *Elizabeth*,  
from *Africa*, and to be sold, by  
**John Miller,**  
At his House, or Store ;  
**A Number of healthy**  
Negro Boys and Girls.  
Likewise to be sold, — *Tillock's* and *Kip-*  
*pen's* Snuff, by the Cask or Dozen.  
North-Kingston, June 30, 1764.  
**R**UN away from *Amos Gardner*, of this Town,  
a Negro Man named *Cambridge*, a short thick-  
set Fellow, about 24 Years old ; he had on when he  
went away, a thick black Jacket, and another of  
blue and white strip'd Flannel, without Sleeves, a  
worsted Cap, new Shoes, a Pair of old Stocking Leg-  
gings, of a grey Colour, and a Pair of wide Trowsers.  
Whoever shall take up said Runaway, and deliver  
him to the Subscriber, or secures him in any of His  
Majesty's Goals so that he may be had again, shall re-  
ceive Five Dollars Reward, and have all necessary  
Charges paid, by  
*Amos Gardner.*  
**Ten Dollars Reward.**  
New-London, June 4, 1764.  
**R**AN away from his Master, *John*  
*Miller*, of New-London, in *Connecti-*  
*cut*, on the 2d Inst. a Negro Man named  
**PRIMUS**, *Virginia* born, about 23 Years  
of Age, of a middling Stature, has a De-  
fect in his left Wrist : had on when he  
went away, a Kersey Jacket with Lea-  
ther Buttons, a check'd Shirt, a Pair of  
short Trowsers, a new Felt Hat, and an  
old Pair of blue Stockings. Whoever  
will take up said Negro, and secure him  
so that his Master may have him again,  
shall have **TEN DOLLARS** Reward,  
and all necessary Charges paid, by  
**JOHN MILLER.**  
*N. B.* All Masters of Vessels and  
others, are hereby cautioned against har-  
boring, concealing or carrying off said  
Negro, as they will answer it at their  
Peril.  
--BOARD AND LODGINGS.--

Advertisements in the newspaper announcing the sale of boys and girls into enslavement, as well as two men, Cambridge and Primus, who had each run away from his enslaver. *Providence Gazette and Country Journal*, July 28, 1764, Rhode Island Historical Society (Printed Collection).

<sup>5</sup> Joanne Pope Melish, "Rhode Island, Slavery, and the Slave Trade," *EnCompass*, Rhode Island Historical Society, accessed January 2, 2023. <http://library.providence.edu/encompass/rhode-island-slavery-and-the-slave-trade/>.

<sup>6</sup> Edward J. Eberle, "Rhode Island Interest: Another of Roger Williams Gifts: Women's Right to Liberty of Conscience: *Joshua Verin v Providence Plantations*," *Roger Williams University Law Review* 9, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 399–407. [http://docs.rwu.edu/rwu\\_LR/vol9/iss2/5](http://docs.rwu.edu/rwu_LR/vol9/iss2/5) and National Memorial Rhode Island, "Roger Williams: The Verin Case," National Park Service, last modified February 26, 2015, accessed January 2, 2023. <https://www.nps.gov/rowi/learn/historyculture/verincase.htm>.





Trial of Mrs. Hutchinson.

Engraving of the Trial of Mrs. Hutchinson from Scribner's *Popular History of the United States* by William Cullen Bryant, Sydney Howard Gay, and Noah Brooks.

So too, could a woman share the word of God, as did women like Hutchinson and Mary Dyer. Women acting surreptitiously was not a new occurrence, but in Rhode Island, such behavior was actually permitted. And yet, the freedoms of the 1643 patent and the 1663 charter did not extend to women any more than laws might in the Massachusetts Bay Colony or Connecticut, such as varying forms of property ownership or the right to vote. Rhode Island was a place of spiritual freedom and gender-blind religious leadership, if nothing else.

### WRITING RADICALISM: ENSURING FREEDOM OF THE PRESS AND CODIFYING THE REVOLUTION

Revolutionary acts, of course, are not always violent. When Roger Williams began the Colony of Rhode Island, he and those who shared his vision made sure to codify religious tolerance, as well as the right to express thoughts related to one's beliefs, religious or otherwise. Laws were still in place against slanderous or treasonous speech, but speech that was simply in disagreement with the systems of power was protected.

Women's freedom to own property or businesses was in most ways similar across the colonies. In Rhode Island, however, women's right to hold their own beliefs and express them was protected. We should not be surprised, then, to see women early in Rhode Island's story taking the helm of their late husbands' printing presses, as was the case for Ann Franklyn (Franklin) and Mary Katherine Goddard. They became leading disseminators of political and legal knowledge, a role that had been almost exclusively filled by male business owners. In this instance, it is not just who was doing the work but what they were setting down in type.<sup>7</sup>

To our twenty-first-century eyes, it may be obvious that a free press is integral to the success of a democracy. However, in the eighteenth century, as men and women worked toward independence, they relied on brave printers who worked without such protection.

They risked their safety and livelihood to share the events, sermons, essays, and laws that shaped the thinking and actions of the period.

These printers had a great degree of power and influence in shaping the emerging republic. But, would it be possible that the press could use past events, even ones committed without explicit revolutionary intentions, to bolster the fight for independence?

### BEYOND, OR BEFORE, THE BOSTON TEA PARTY

While the Boston Tea Party is perhaps the best-known protest leading to the American Revolution, it is far from the only one. The dissatisfaction spreading throughout the colonies took specific forms based on the socio-political and economic structures of each colony. The lessons in this collection include one that examines the Regulators of North Carolina and the *Gaspee* Affair in Rhode Island. Both took place well before the celebrated Boston event, and yet their relationship to revolutionary thought and ideals is not often shared in our textbooks and classrooms as crucial moments in national history, but rather as stories of local interest.<sup>8</sup>

Although these episodes have little in common regarding their ultimate actions, they are similar in that they were reactions of merchants and landholders trying to find safety and security in relation to the British Crown. One group, however, sided with the Crown and fought against the corruption of power-hungry local officials, leading to the question: are all forms of resistance revolutionary?

The other affair was led by wealthy men of influence who were tired of needing permission from Great Britain for their success, and the action was, at the time, a commercial dispute. Months later, it was celebrated as an act of revolution. So, who gets to decide? Does one need to have revolutionary intent to commit a revolutionary action? Or might there be accidental revolutionaries?

<sup>7</sup> "Women in Printing History, Part 2: Women Printers in the American Colonies," International Printing Museum Blog, <https://www.printmuseum.org/blog-3/women-printers-2>.

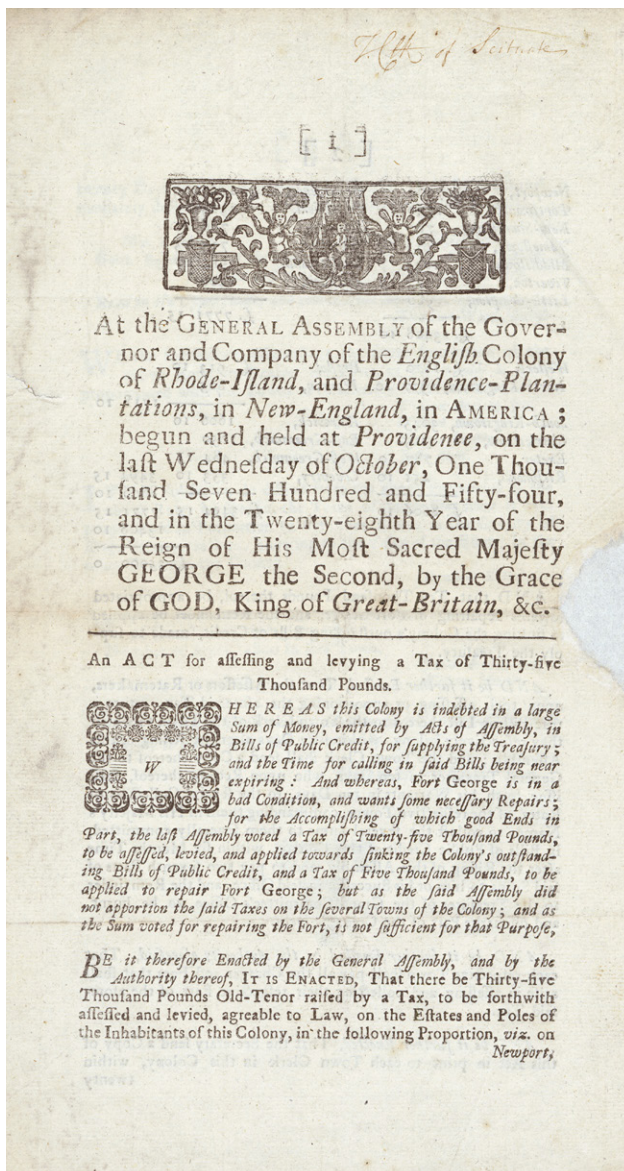
<sup>8</sup> Steven Park, "On the Burning of His Majesty's Schooner *Gaspee* in 1772," *EnCompass*, Rhode Island Historical Society, accessed January 2, 2023. <http://library.providence.edu/encompass/on-the-burning-of-his-majestys-schooner-gaspee-in-1772/>.

*Ideals are like the stars: we never reach them, but like the mariners of the sea, we chart our course by them. —Carl Schurz*

As you use the resources here, you will repeatedly see that people's actions do not always match their stated ideals, individual or collective. Each step, each rebellion, each article printed, or a life lived in the face of oppression reinforced the ideals of tolerance, freedom, and democracy either by showing what expansion of these ideals looked like, or by demonstrating the profound inhumanity of their absence.

By exploring the steps, forward and back, that people took to reach the American Revolution, we hope you will see that having not yet lived up to the profound and foundational ideals examined here should not negate the ideals but rather inspire us to keep working toward them—to keep practicing this “lively experiment.”

And while many of these resources use Rhode Island's history as their basis, our hope is not only that you will incorporate more of this small state's fascinating history into your classrooms, but also that you will look at your community, your state, your region and find the moments in which the peoples there took actions to promote the ideals of tolerance and democracy and see them as part of an enduring legacy.



An act of the Rhode Island General Assembly, printed by Ann Franklyn (Franklin) and her son James Franklyn (Franklin), Jr., in Newport, 1754. In 1636, Ann Franklin began printing the acts and laws of the colony for the Rhode Island General Assembly. Rhode Island Historical Society (G 1157 Broad sides 1754 No.1).

## BOOK LIST FOR TEACHERS

- › John Barry, *Rhode Island and the Creation of the American Soul*
- › Chris Beneke and Christopher S. Grenda, Editors, *The Lively Experiment: Religious Toleration in America from Roger Williams to the Present*
- › Mary Sarah Bilder, *The Transatlantic Constitution: Colonial Legal Culture and the Empire*
- › Lisa Brooks, *Our Beloved Kin: A New History of King Philip's War*
- › Christy Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island*
- › Jay Coughtry, *The Notorious Triangle: Rhode Island and the Slave Trade, 1700–1807*
- › Christine M. DeLucia, *Memory Lands: King Philip's War and the Place of Violence*
- › Cynthia Mestad Johnson, *James DeWolf & The Rhode Island Slave Trade*
- › Marjoleine Kars, *Breaking Loose Together: The Regulator Rebellion in Pre-Revolutionary North Carolina*
- › Eve LaPlante, *American Jezebel: The Uncommon Life of Anne Hutchinson, the Woman who Defied the Puritans*
- › Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity*
- › William G. McLaughlin, *Rhode Island: A History*
- › Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860*
- › Edmond S. Morgan, *Roger Williams: The Church and the State*
- › Steven Park, *The Burning of His Majesty's Schooner Gaspee*
- › Patricia Rubertone, *Grave Undertakings: An Archaeology of Roger Williams and the Narragansett Indians*
- › Eric B. Schultz and Michael J. Tougias, *King Philip's War: The History and Legacy of America's Forgotten Conflict*
- › James A. Warren, *God, War, and Providence: The Epic Struggle of Roger Williams and the Narragansett Indians Against the Puritans of New England*
- › Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America*