

**TOWN AND CITY
GOVERNMENT
IN PROVIDENCE**

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Town and City Government in Providence by George G. Wilson

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GEORGE G. WILSON

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By GEORGE G. WILSON.

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Town and City Government in Providence.

EARLY SETTLEMENT.

The local government of New England has always been vigorous. In some sections, for many years, the civil power exercised both political and religious authority. The colonies along Massachusetts Bay partook largely of the nature of religious communities. It was the object "first to settle religion here, before profits or popularity."¹

Discussions in regard to the nature and limit of civil powers characterized the seventeenth century. Even before the first of the New England colonists disembarked there was found among them "some appearance of faction which led to the agreement to submit to the government that should be established."² This early "appearance of faction" soon became a reality. Attempts to extend religious authority led to opposition, yet, for the most part, the religious element prevailed. In Massachusetts Bay colony the government was little less than theocratic. Here differences of opinion as to the functions of the civil magistrate in matters pertaining to religion became frequent. The expression of these ideas was deemed "dangerous" by the government and could not be tolerated.

Among those who dared to express an opinion in regard to the authority of magistrates as exercised at the "Bay" was

¹ Young's Chronicles, p. 26.

² Mourt's Relation, p. 2.

NOTE.—Chapters I. and II. were read before the Rhode Island Historical Society, April 23, 1889.

The writer desires to acknowledge his indebtedness to those who have kindly placed at his disposal documents and other material bearing upon the history of the town and city, especially to Henry V. A. Joslin, City Clerk of Providence.

Roger Williams. His action in this and other "matters of conscience" led to his departure from the jurisdiction of Massachusetts Bay colony. In accordance with a suggestion from Governor Winthrop, Williams was led "to steer" his course to Narragansett Bay, "from the freedness of the place from any English claims or patents."¹ Arriving at Seekonk, he "began to build," but on information that he was in the edge of the "bounds" of Plymouth, he crossed the river and made his settlement at the head of Narragansett Bay. This place, in acknowledgment of divine leading, he called Providence.

In speaking of his settlement here, Williams says: "My souls desire was to do the natives good." "It is not true, that I was employed by any, was supplied by any, or desired any to come with me into these parts," nor did he desire "to be troubled with English company, yet out of Pity"² gave leave to several persons to accompany him. He did not desire to form a Puritan commonwealth. The settlement at Providence was not made with a definite purpose like that in the valley of the Connecticut river.

The neighboring colonies had received a measure of assistance from the parent community. The settlement at Providence was not made under any such favorable circumstances. The government under which the early settlers had lived before taking up their abode at the mouth of the "Mooshausie" river was near enough to interfere in any questions where its interest might be involved. The band who formed the early body of citizens brought with them no system of government resolving them into a "body politic." Money and supplies were wanting. There was no charter from a parent state upon which to base the authority for their acts. To institute a form of government under such adverse conditions would, at least, be difficult, but a still greater obstacle was to be overcome. The widely differing opinions of these settlers must be, in a meas-

¹ Narragansett Club Pub., vol. vi, p. 335.

² Harris MSS., also R. I. Hist. Tracts, No. 14, p. 53.