

5-13-2013

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## Recommended Citation

Rodrigues, Jill, "The Rhode Island Charter and Roger Williams's Legacy" (2013). *Featured News Story*. 118.  
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# The Rhode Island Charter and Roger Williams's Legacy

Historians, scholars and a legal expert illuminate Roger Williams's influence on the American principles of freedom of conscience and limited government that continue to both resonate and cause tension today



May 13, 2013 | Jill Rodrigues '05

**BRISTOL, R.I.** – Did you know that Roger Williams became impoverished from his tireless quest to secure Rhode Island's original charter, which confirms the state's sovereignty and guarantees its citizens much more freedom than elsewhere in the original colonies and across the ocean in Europe? Rhode Island's founding father – and this University's namesake – believed so strongly in protecting basic civil liberties that he was chased out of England and banished from Massachusetts for his opinions, only to forge ahead despite great financial costs and risks to his own freedom to lead the charge of obtaining the most rights guaranteed a citizenry at the time.

In celebration of the [350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Rhode Island Colonial Charter](#), Roger Williams University kicked off the statewide celebration Thursday, hosting five members of [Governor Chafee's Rhode Island 1663 Colonial Charter Commission](#) for a panel discussion on the significance of the state's original charter. From historians to scholars to a legal expert, the five panelists shared their unique perspectives on the importance of the Rhode Island Colonial Charter – a document with significant influence on other colonial charters and on the U.S. Constitution itself – and the quest of Roger Williams and John Clarke to secure the charter from King Charles II of England.

Scott McKay, political analyst for [Rhode Island Public Radio](#), moderated the discussion. The five panelists included:

- Patrick Conley, Esq. – Professor of History, Providence College (retired)
- Morgan Grefe – Executive Director, Rhode Island Historical Society
- Stanley Lemons – Professor Emeritus of History, Rhode Island College

- David Logan, Esq. – Dean and Professor of Law, Roger Williams University School of Law
- Ray Rickman – Historian and President of the Rickman Group

Each panelist offered insightful comments during the two-hour discussion. Here are some highlights from each panelist:

### **Patrick Conley, Professor of History**

“Roger Williams was a traditionalist, and he believed in order,” Conley said. “And whatever type of government that did exist – as long as it didn’t interfere with soul liberty, as he would phrase it, with freedom of conscious – then that government, if it maintained order and was a fair and just government, was satisfactory to him. I think too much has been made about Roger Williams, the irrepressible Democrat, but never was enough made about Roger Williams, the individual who believed in soul liberty and its corollary, the separation of church and state.”

### **Stanley Lemons, Professor Emeritus of History**

“There is a big monument to the Reformation in Geneva, Switzerland, and there is one figure from America in it and that is Roger Williams. He’s described as the prophet of religious liberty. I believe that’s his message to our time and to all time since then,” Lemons said. “It is interesting that the two clauses in the First Amendment that deal with religion embrace the two clauses that Roger Williams stood for – there will be no establishment [of a church] and there will be free exercise of religion. Now I can’t say if the people who wrote that – James Madison, in particular – had read Roger Williams and knew these were his two principles. But this is his legacy, in part, that he is a prophet of religious liberty. And if the world would embrace that there would be far fewer bombings in Boston or in Baghdad, where people are killing each other because they are a different religion or a different denomination in the same religion.”

### **David Logan, Dean and Professor of Law**

“We might say he was one of the people who represented the libertarian frame of mind that’s so powerful in this country and so puzzling to people who come from other legal cultures. The idea of a man’s home is his castle – the government has no place in determining what you do with your property. People who want to go live off by themselves and have no government – you don’t see that sort of phenomenon in European cultures,” Logan said. “And so I think we might also say that he tapped into this vein of stubborn independence that’s a big part of the American culture. It has its place in the law but I think it has a larger place in how we view government – the fundamental way that government is not there to tell us what to do; the government is there to make us free.”

### **Morgan Grefe, Executive Director of the Rhode Island Historical Society**

“As we look at creations of culture and creative culture and we look at American history and world history, it’s often those points of cultural contact that amazing things happen,” Grefe said. “When we look at things like jazz, art, poetry, ideas, they’re often shaped by the experiences of different cultures coming together. One of the things I’d love for people to think about this year as we consider the charter is what are the cultural effects of something like the Charter? What does it mean that we [Rhode Islanders] have advertised and welcomed people of all different faiths? What does it mean that some of those are forced immigrants in the slave trade and brought to this soil? It still means that people are living with each other, working with each other, are exposed to one another’s cultures and ideas, religions, and thoughts. That creates a dynamic experience and a dynamic community that I think is in many ways responsible for the kind of innovation that happens here in business, but also in the beautiful architecture, in the beautiful spaces that are created. I would love for people not just to think about the importance of the political and the intellectual – even the

financial side – but to think about the creative part of what something like the Charter can create as we bring all of these people next to each other. And I think Rhode Island in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries had more of that than you can possibly imagine as it creates a very creative and cosmopolitan culture in many of these ports.”

### Ray Rickman, Historian and President of the Rickman Group

“Because there are Jews, because there are Buddhists, because there are Christians like me that don’t want even the Episcopalian governor telling me what to believe or do,” said Rickman, who identified himself as Episcopalian. “And I certainly don’t want the next Catholic governor telling me what to do. I’m not anti-Catholic anybody. If I wanted to be a Catholic I’d be one. And I don’t want that Bishop telling me how to live or spending my government money doing it.”

He added: “I think everybody has a responsibility – we have rights and one day we’re going to look up and they’ll be gone. And it isn’t going to be the Catholic Bishop (of Rhode Island) that took them away from us. It is going to be our inaction, our inability to teach children and ourselves that we should have freedom of religion, that nobody should tell us what to believe. So I’m asking everybody to pay attention to Roger.”

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The Charter Panel event served as the kickoff to a series of RWU events focused on the Rhode Island Colonial Charter during its 350<sup>th</sup> year. Later this week, award-winning author and historian John M. Barry – acclaimed expert on Roger Williams himself – will address the Roger Williams University Class of 2013 and receive an honorary degree during the University’s Commencement exercises.

Other events are being planned, including a panel of RWU faculty who will convene early this fall to expand the conversation on the Charter and a sponsorship (in collaboration with the School of Law) of a full lighting of WaterFire Providence on the evening of Saturday, Sept. 28. Event details will be released in the coming months.

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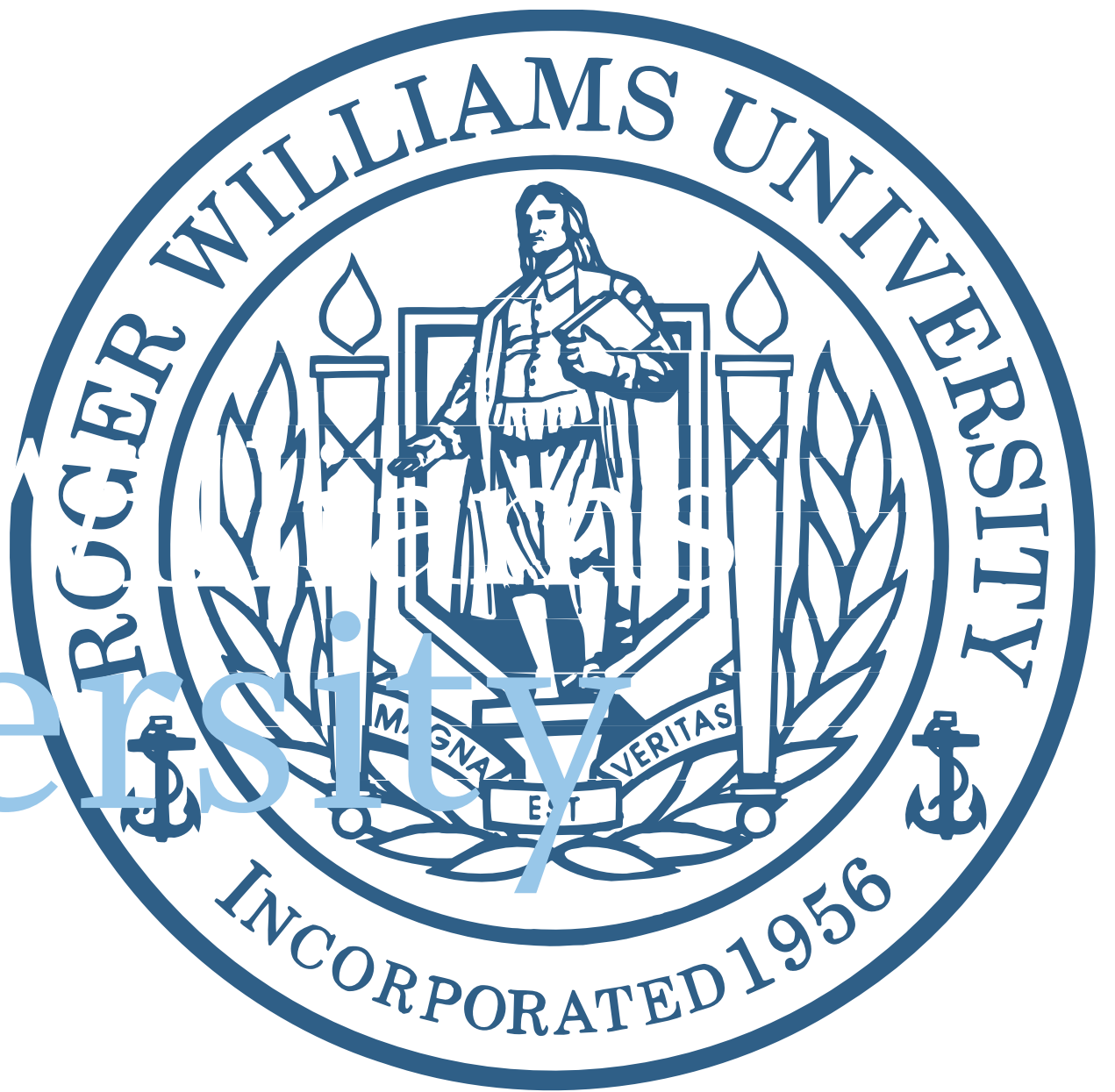
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