

# Guide to the Body of Laws of the Colony of Rhode Island 1647-1705

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**Title:**

Body of Laws of the Colony of Rhode Island

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English

**Abstract:**

The Body of Laws of the Colony of RI consists of statutes and other legislation enacted by the General Assembly of the Colony of Rhode Island from 1647 to 1705.

**Administrative/Biographical History:**

Rhode Island's first permanent settlement was established at Providence in 1636 by English clergyman Roger Williams and a small band of followers who had left the repressive atmosphere of the Massachusetts Bay Colony to seek freedom of worship. Canenicus and Miantonomi granted Williams a sizable tract of land for his new village. Other nonconformists followed Williams to the bay region, including Anne and William Hutchinson and William Coddington, all of whom founded Portsmouth in 1638 as a haven for Antinomians, a religious sect whose beliefs resembled those of Quakerism. A short-lived dispute sent Coddington to the southern tip of Aquidneck Island (also purchased from the Narragansetts), where he established Newport in 1639. The fourth original town, Warwick, was settled in 1642 by Samuel Gorton, another dissident from Portsmouth. During this initial decade two other outposts were established: Wickford (1637), by Richard Smith, and Pawtuxet (1638), by William Harris and the Arnold family.

Because titles to these lands rested only on Indian deeds, neighboring colonies began to covet them. To meet this threat, Roger Williams journeyed to England and secured a parliamentary patent in March 1643-44 uniting the four towns into a single colony and confirming his fellow settlers' land claims. This legislative document served adequately as the basic law until the Stuart Restoration of 1660 made it wise to seek a royal charter.

Dr. John Clarke was commissioned to secure a document from the new king, Charles II, which would both be consistent with the religious principles upon which the tiny colony was founded and also safeguard Rhode Island lands from encroachment by speculators and greedy neighbors. He succeeded admirably. The royal charter of 1663 guaranteed complete religious liberty, established a self-governing colony with local autonomy, and strengthened Rhode Island's territorial claims. It was the most liberal

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charter to be issued by the mother country during the entire colonial era, a fact that enabled it to serve as Rhode Island's basic law until May 1843.

The religious freedom, which prevailed in early Rhode Island, made it a refuge for several persecuted sects. America's first Baptist church was formed in Providence in 1639; Quakers, who arrived in Aquidneck in 1657 and soon became a powerful force in the colony's political and economic life; a Jewish congregation came to Newport in 1658; and French Huguenots (Calvinists) settled in East Greenwich in 1686.

The most important and traumatic event in seventeenth-century Rhode Island was King Philip's War (1675-76), the culmination of a four-decade decline in Indian-white relations. Roger Williams had won the grudging respect of his colonial neighbors for his diplomatic skill in keeping the powerful Narragansetts on friendly terms with local white settlers. The Narragansetts in 1637 were even persuaded to form an alliance with the English in carrying out a punitive expedition that nearly extinguished the warlike Pequots. But by 1670 even the friendly tribes who had greeted Williams and the Pilgrims became estranged from the white colonists, and the storm clouds of war began to darken the New England countryside.

Clashes in culture, the appropriation by whites of Indian land for their exclusive ownership, and a series of hostile incidents between the Wampanoag chief King Philip (Metacom) and the aggressive government of Plymouth Colony resulted in the terrible colonial conflict called King Philip's War. This futile struggle to rid New England of the white man consumed the lives of several thousand Indians and more than six hundred whites and resulted in enormous property damage.

The Narragansetts, at first neutral, joined forces with the Wampanoags after a Plymouth force staged a sneak attack on the Narragansetts' principal village in the Great Swamp (South Kingstown) in December 1675. The Great Swamp Fight cost the lives of three hundred braves and almost four hundred women and children. The Narragansetts regrouped and launched a vengeful offensive the following spring. On March 26 a large war party led by chief sachem Canonchet massacred a company of approximately sixty-five Englishmen and twenty friendly Indians led by Captain Michael Pierce on the banks of the Blackstone in present-day Central Falls. Three days later the victorious Narragansetts descended upon defenseless Providence, burning most of the buildings in the town. For Williams, who witnessed the event, it represented the destruction of four decades of hard-earned progress.

But famine, disease, and wartime casualties soon decimated the ranks of the Narragansetts and their Wampanoag allies. The killing of King Philip in August 1676 by an Indian allied with the whites effectively ended the war. Remnants of the Narragansetts, Wampanoags, and Pequots sought refuge with the peaceful Niantics, who had remained neutral. This aggregate of remnant groups became the foundation of a new Indian community in Rhode Island that ultimately assumed the name Narragansett. Other important seventeenth-century developments included the interruption in government caused by James II's abortive Dominion for New England (1686-89), which was a vain effort to consolidate the northern colonies under royal governor Edmond Andros, and the beginning of the intermittent colonial wars between England and France (1689-1763), a seventy-five year struggle for empire that frequently involved Rhode Island men, money, and ships. By the end of the seventeenth century, Newport -- unscathed by King Philip's War -- had emerged as a prosperous port and the colony's dominant community, nine towns had been incorporated, and the population exceeded six thousand inhabitants. The first quarter of the eighteenth century was marked by the long and able governorship of Samuel Cranston (1698-1727), who established internal unity and brought his colony into a better working relationship with the imperial government in London.

Excerpt from <http://www.rilin.state.ri.us/studteaguide/RhodeIslandHistory/chapt2.html>

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## **Scope and content:**

# Guide to Body of Laws of the Colony of Rhode Island

The Body of Laws of the colony of RI consists of statutes and other legislation enacted by the General Assembly of the Colony of Rhode Island from 1663 to 1705. The laws pertain to the governance of the colony and the responsibilities of public servants; the punishment of crimes; treason; elections; the organization of the colonial courts; the militia; taxes and fees. Laws also pertain to personal behavior, including sexuality and the behavior of children toward parents; the obligations of laborers; the maintenance of property; fraud; slander; servitude; and Negroes and Indians. There are articles and agreements between the colonies of Rhode Island and Connecticut concerning boundaries.

## **System of arrangement:**

The Body of Laws of the Colony of Rhode Island is arranged into the following series:

Series 1. Body of Laws of the Colony of Rhode Island, 1647-1705

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## **Accruals:**

No additional accruals are anticipated.

## **Related archival materials:**

## **RIAMCO Browsing Term (if applicable):**

Government, Politics and Law

Rhode Island/Local Interest

## **Subjects:**

Rhode Island (Colony). Laws, statutes, etc.

Colonies--America

Legislative bodies--Rhode Island.

Public records--Rhode Island.

Legislative bodies--Rhode Island.

Legislation--Rhode Island.

Court records--Rhode Island.

Freemen (American colonies)

Colonies--America

America--History--To 1810.

Rhode Island--History--Colonial period, ca. 1600-1775.

United States--History--Colonial period, ca. 1600-1775.

Rhode Island--Politics and government--To 1775.

Rhode Island--Boundaries--Connecticut.

## **Types of Materials:**

volumes (documents by form)

## **Inventory:**

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