Reading outside the lines
Brown students are deciphering shorthand notes thought to be work of Roger Williams
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THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / BOB THAYER Brown University student researchers cracking the Roger Williams code include, from left, Chris Norris-LeBlanc, Lucas Mason-Brown and Simon Liebling.

PROVIDENCE — A code is scrawled in the margins of a 17thcentury book kept in a Brown University library. The code's author is thought to be Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island. The shorthand symbols on page after page have remained mysteries for centuries, but now some Brown University undergraduates are cracking the code. A junior with a math concentra- tion, a junior and senior both majoring in history, and a senior in American studies have spent four months combining disciplines to translate this sort of lost language and to divine, using historical events as a guide, what they believe one of the nation's formative figures jotted down and why. The underlying book, "An Essay Towards the Reconciling of Differences Among Christians," which is by another author whose identity the students said is unknown, is missing the title page, but its more than 230 pages bear printed paragraphs in older English. But it's what is written by hand above and around that print — books within a book — that the four

students say is being revealed. "Roger Williams is writing all over this book in code — it's like something out of Harry Potter, but Harry Potter set in Rhode Island," said Ted Widmer, director of the university's John Carter Brown Library, where the book has been since 1817. "It was in a language no one could speak." Lucas Mason-Brown, of Belmont, Mass., a junior with a math concentration, used a technique called "frequency analysis," which involves making a list of the symbols and determining their frequency of use to sort out their meaning. Mason-Brown said the shorthand on the book's first 160 pages is fully translated. It is Williams copying information from another work, Peter Heylin's "Cosmographie in Four Books," published in 1654. Williams' writing, according to the students, focused on various parts of Europe and made characterizations — generalizations, even — about people living there. The shorthand follows the geography that Heylin's book presents, starting in Italy and including France, Spain, northern Europe, the British Isles and Russia. Williams' writing also mentions Roman and medieval place names. Simon Liebling, a senior history major from Highland Park, N.J., said the students' research suggests that Williams did the shorthand copying of text during his final trip to England so he could bring the knowledge back to America. Mason-Brown said the time of Williams' final visit to England coincides with the publishing date of Heylin's work. There was no Internet, no promise of finding a book in stores or libraries, no copier machines, but Williams had been trained in shorthand as a child. "This was a way for him to write extremely quickly," Liebling said. Another reason for shorthand could have included saving space, given the cost of paper, Mason-Brown said. He said the shorthand on the book's final 20 pages is now partially translated, and the students say it appears to have a markedly different focus, one that includes mention of eunuchs and hermaphrodites. The students think that Williams might have used the back of the book to copy information from another author's work but have not yet pinpointed what or whose it was. But it is the shorthand in the middle of "An Essay Towards the Reconciling of Differences Among Christians" that may prove most interesting — and, so far, more difficult to decipher. Mason-Brown said he believes Williams was not copying but putting down his own thoughts in the book's middle section. Chris Norris-LeBlanc, a junior from Pawtucket, said there are differences in the structure of the shorthand. And there is mention of a Williams contemporary, John Eliot, a Puritan who was the first to print a Bible in America, in the 1600s. The Williams project grew out of a presentation Widmer gave about a year ago to alumni gathering on campus. One of the people in the audience, Bill Twaddell, brought up the mystery book, Widmer said, and that eventually led to Widmer and some university faculty talking about what it would take to break the code. A call went out seeking students for an independent study. The students say there is a lot of work left — more efforts to translate the shorthand and more understanding of what Williams chose to write. The research probably won't be finished by the end of this academic year, they said. Mason-Brown and the other students, including senior Katharine Mead of Owego, N.Y., and Norris-LeBlanc meet each week or every other week, typically in a café at the university's student center, to go over what they've done and to determine the next tasks. "If this tells us anything about Roger Williams," Mason-Brown said, "it's that he is a genuine scholar." The students said they have access to many

professors who gave them lists of possible source materials to see what matched the shorthand. Another significant thing in cracking the code is the Internet. Unlike Williams' long trip to England, the students can log on and quickly access a text held at, say, Cambridge University, according to Norris-Le-Blanc. Mason-Brown said he and the other students are still talking about what they might do with their research. "As a final project, we're going to try to put something together," Norris-LeBlanc said.