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# RHODE ISLAND HISTORY AND FACTS OF INTEREST

## NATIVES AND EXPLORERS

Indigenous people, mistakenly named “Indians” by Columbus, were the first inhabitants of present-day Rhode Island. European contacts with Rhode Island and its coastline have been claimed for several explorers, including medieval Irish adventurers, Norsemen, Portuguese navigator Miguel Corte-Real, and Italian navigator Giovanni Verrazzano.

Sailing to Rhode Island in 1524, Verrazzano “discovered an island in the form of a triangle, distant from the mainland ten leagues, about the bigness of the (Greek) Island of Rhodes,” this was Block Island.

Roger Williams and other early settlers thought that Verrazzano was referring to Aquidneck Island and changed that island’s native name to Rhode Island. In this way, Verrazzano inadvertently gave the state part of its official name. No other significant recorded visits were made to Rhode Island until 1614, when English explorer John Smith charted the New England coast and Dutch mariner Adriaen Block, visited Block Island, naming it for himself.

Beginning in 1620, settlers from Plymouth Colony and Massachusetts Bay ventured into the region to trade with native tribes. In 1635, Rhode Island’s first European settler, an eccentric Anglican clergyman named William Blackstone, arrived and built a home near Lonsdale on the banks of the river that now bears his name.

At the time, Rhode Island was inhabited by several native tribes. The largest of these were the Narragansetts, occupying an area along Narragansett Bay from Warwick to South Kingstown. Their population - including the Niantics, a related tribe - has been estimated at about seven thousand when the first Europeans arrived. The northwest corner of the state was home to the Nipmucks, while the Wampanoags held territory within Providence and Warwick and may have held islands in Narragansett Bay. Two subtribes also lived in the Warwick area, the Cowesetts and the Shawomets. Niantics populated much of the towns of Charlestown and Westerly. The Pequots, a Connecticut tribe, arrived in 1632 to battle the Narragansetts for control of an area east of the Pawcatuck River in Westerly and Hopkinton.

These people subsisted on farming, fishing, and hunting and lived in compact villages composed of families who shared a kin relationship. These villages were led by subsachems or petty sachems. Ultimate governmental authority for the Narragansetts rested in two chief sachems, Canonicus and his nephew Miantonomi, both of whom reigned when Roger Williams founded the town of Providence. Roger Williams founded the first permanent white settlement in Rhode Island at Providence (Providence Plantations) in 1636 on land purchased from the Narragansett Indians. Forced to flee Massachusetts because of persecution, Williams established a policy of religious and political freedom in his new settlement. Other leaders advocating freedom of worship soon established similar communities on either side of Narragansett Bay. These communities united, and in 1663 King Charles II of England granted them a royal charter, providing for a greater degree of self-government than any other colony in the New World and authorizing the continuation of freedom of religion.

The present name of the state, Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, was officially adopted in the Royal Charter of 1663.

The early 1700s was a period of prosperity for Rhode Island. Farming and sea trading became profitable businesses. Providence and Newport were among the busiest ports in the New World. Despite making profits from the slave trade, Rhode Island was the first colony to prohibit the importation of slaves.

At the start of the Revolutionary War, Rhode Islanders were among the first colonists to take action against British rule by attacking British vessels. On May 4, 1776, Rhode Island was the first colony to renounce allegiance to Great Britain and declare independence. Although no major battles took place in the state, Rhode Island regiments participated in every major campaign of the war. Rhode Islanders such as General Nathanael Greene, second-in-command to General George Washington, and Commodore Esek Hopkins, Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Navy, distinguished themselves as military leaders and heroes. The first Black regiment to fight for America made a gallant stand against the British in the Battle of Rhode Island.

Rhode Island’s independent spirit was still in evidence at the close of the Revolutionary War. It was the last of the 13 original colonies to ratify the US Constitution, demanding that the Bill of Rights, which guarantees individual liberties, be added.

Following the Revolution, industrial growth began in Rhode Island. In 1790, Samuel Slater's mill in Pawtucket became America's first successful water-powered cotton mill. From this success, the Industrial Revolution in America began. In addition, the founding of the American jewelry industry by Nehemiah and Seril Dodge helped make Providence one of the chief industrial cities of New England by 1824. Jabez Gorham, jeweler and silversmith, was the forerunner of the world renowned Gorham Manufacturing Company.

As industrialization increased, Rhode Island's cities expanded with immigration. New citizens looking for job opportunities came from a score of countries, mainly Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, and French Canada. Over the years, as these workers became assimilated into Rhode Island's industrial structure, a tradition of manufacturing skill and excellence developed that is still an important asset for the state's economy.

## GOVERNMENT

**Rhode Island's official name:** State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations

**Capital:** Providence

**Governor:** Donald Carcieri (R)

**US Senators:** Lincoln D. Chafee (R) and John F. Reed (D)

**US Representatives:** Patrick Kennedy (D) and James R. Langevin (D)

The Rhode Island legislature, called the General Assembly, is bicameral, with a Senate and a House of Representatives whose members are apportioned on the basis of population. The Senate has 38 members and is presided over by the Senate President who is elected from the membership. The House of Representatives has 75 members and is presided over by the Speaker who is elected from the membership. Election to both houses is for a term of two years. Each legislator is paid \$10,000 annually, plus mileage. The Speaker of the House and the Senate President are paid double the amount of the other members.

The Governor, Lt. Governor, Secretary of State, Attorney General and General Treasurer are elected to four year terms. Rhode Island is one of two states with no county government. It is divided into 39 municipalities, each having its own form of local government.

## GEOGRAPHY

**Area:** 1,214 square miles

**Greatest Distances:** North to South - 48 miles; East to West - 37 miles

**Elevation:** Highest - Jerimoth Hill in Foster (812 feet); Lowest - Sea level along Atlantic coast.

**Population:** 1,048,319 (2000 Census); Urban - 86%; Rural - 14%

**Coastline:** Over 400 miles

**Climate:** Avg. Jan. Temperature - 30 degrees Fahrenheit; Avg. July Temperature - 72 degrees Fahrenheit

**Yearly Precipitation:** 44 inches (avg.)

## ECONOMY

Service producing industries are Rhode Island's chief source of income and employ the greatest number of people. Jewelry manufacturing is the single largest industry in the state, making Rhode Island the "Jewelry Capital of the World". Other important sources of income are: Agriculture (dairy and poultry products); Fisheries (especially shellfish); and wholesale and retail trade. Providence is a major wholesale distribution center for New England; its port handles much of the oil shipped throughout the region. Tourism is also one of Rhode Island's largest industries, generating over \$1.5 billion dollars in annual revenues.

## STATE EMBLEMS

**State Flag:** The flag of the state shall be white, five feet and six inches fly and four feet and ten inches deep on the pike, bearing on each side in the center a gold anchor, twenty-two inches high, and underneath it a blue ribbon twenty-four inches long and five inches wide, or in these proportions, with the motto "Hope" in golden letters thereon, the whole surrounded by thirteen golden stars in a circle. The flag shall be edged with yellow fringe. The pike shall be surmounted by a spearhead and the length of the pike shall be nine feet, not including the spearhead.

**Arms of the State:** The arms of the state are a golden anchor on a blue field, and the motto thereof is the word "Hope."

**State Seal:** There shall continue to be one seal for the public use of the state; the form of an anchor shall be engraven thereon; the motto thereof shall be the word "Hope"; and in a circle around the outside shall be engraven the words, "Seal of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1636".

**State Bird:** The breed of fowl, commonly known as the "Rhode Island Red," is designated, and shall be known, as the official state bird.

**State Tree:** The tree commonly known as the "red maple" (*acer rubrum*) is hereby designated as the state tree.

**State Flower:** The flower commonly known as the "violet" (*viola palmata*) is hereby designated as the state flower.

**State Shell:** The shellfish, commonly known as the "quahaug" (*mercenaria mercenaria*), is hereby designated as the state shell for the state.

**State Mineral:** The state mineral, Bowenite, is a close relative of jade and can be considered a semi-precious gem stone. It is found in northern Rhode Island and was first discovered in the early 1800's by geologist George Bowen.

**State Rock:** The state rock is Cumberlandite, and is dark brown or black with white markings. It is found on both sides of Narragansett Bay but not north of Cumberland. It will attract a magnet and is estimated to be one and one-half billion years old.

### RHODE ISLAND FACTS AND FIGURES

Rhode Island is the smallest of the 50 states in geographic area. The total area of the state is 1,231 square miles, of which 1,045 are land and 186 are water. This total excludes U.S. territorial waters, which were included in previous years. Narragansett Bay is 120.5 square miles in area, and extends in from the sea 28 miles. Rhode Island has 384 miles of tidal shoreline, which includes the shorelines of the several islands. The greatest length of the state is 48 miles and the greatest width is 37 miles. Rhode Island has 35 islands within its territorial waters, the largest being Block Island, with an area of 10 square miles. The highest point in the state is Jerimoth Hill in Foster, which is 812 feet above sea level. The geographic center of the state is in the center of Middle Road in East Greenwich, about three-quarters of a mile from the West Greenwich town line.

The total population as of the 2000 Census was 1,048,319.

Rhode Island is the second most densely populated state, with 1,003.2 persons per square mile in 2000. There are 6,600 persons per each State Legislator. The population figures are as follows:

Males	481,496
Females	521,968.
White	891,191
Black or African American	46,908
Asian	23,665
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	90,820
American Indian and Alaska native	5,121
Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	567
Some other race	52,616
Two or more races	28,251
Persons under 5 years old	63,896
Persons 5 to 9 years old	71,905
Persons 10 to 14 years old	71,370
Persons 15 to 19 years old	75,445
Persons 20 to 24 years old	71,813
Persons 25 to 34 years old	140,326
Persons 35 to 44 years old	170,310
Persons 45 to 54 years old	141,863
Persons 55 to 59 years old	49,982
Persons 60 to 64 years old	39,007
Persons 65 to 74 years old	73,684
Persons 75 to 84 years old	57,821
Persons 85 years and older	20,897

The median age of persons living in Rhode Island is 36.7 years.  
The per capita personal income was \$29,377. in 1999  
The gross state product in 1998 was \$30,443,000,000.

#### A FEW INTERESTING FACTS CONCERNING RHODE ISLAND GOVERNMENT

Rhode Island was the first of the thirteen colonies to declare its independence from England (May 4, 1776) and the last of the thirteen to ratify the U.S. Constitution (May 29, 1790). Rhode Island was governed under a Royal Charter, granted by King Charles II in 1663, for 180 years. Rhode has been governed under its Constitution for 160 years. Rhode Island is the only state which still celebrates Victory Day (the end of WWII) as an official state holiday.

The metal from which the Independent Man atop the Rhode Island State House was cast came from the breaking up of a statue of Simon Bolivar, which once stood in New York's Central Park. Rhode Island Governor Benedict Arnold, the first Governor elected under the Royal Charter in November, 1663, was the great grandfather of the infamous Revolutionary War figure, Benedict Arnold. The 2003-2004 General Assembly is composed of persons with the following occupations: 27 Attorneys/Paralegals; 12 individuals who provide Financial/Insurance/Real Estate or related services; 14 Health Care/Human Services professionals; 11 Education professionals; 8 Law Enforcement/Public Safety professionals; 16 Small Business owners; 1 Construction Trades professional; 4 Computer Technology/Telecommunications professionals; 3 Farmers; 3 Government Employees; 3 Labor/Management representatives; 2 Homemakers; 1 Museum Director; and 7 Retired Persons. There are 22 women and 91 men in the Assembly. There are 95 Democrats, 17 Republicans and 1 Independent.

#### FAMOUS FIRSTS IN RHODE ISLAND

The first automobile race on a track was held in Cranston, Rhode Island on Sept. 7, 1896.  
The first automobile parade was held in Newport, Rhode Island on Sept. 7, 1899.  
The first Baptist Church in America was founded in Providence, Rhode Island in 1671.  
The first Synagogue in America was founded in Newport, Rhode Island in 1763.  
Rhode Island enacted the first law prohibiting slavery in North America on May 18, 1652.  
Pelham Street in Newport was the first in America to be illuminated by gaslight in 1806.  
Watch Hill, Rhode Island has the nation's oldest carousel that has been in continuous operation (1850).  
The first nine hole golf course in America was completed in Newport in 1890.  
The first strike in the United States in which women participated occurred in Pawtucket, Rhode Island in 1824.  
Anne Franklin of the Newport Mercury was the first woman newspaper editor in America (Aug. 22, 1762).  
The first state health laboratory was established in Providence on Sept. 1, 1894.  
The Rhode Island State House was the first building with an all-marble dome to be built in the United States (1895-1901).  
The first lunch wagon in America was introduced in Providence in 1872.  
The motion picture machine (a machine showing animated pictures) was patented in Providence on April 23, 1867.

*Updated April 14, 2003 Rhode Island State Library*

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