



HISTORY

'Soaked into the wood': A visit to the birthplace of religious liberty

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HEARD ON ALL THINGS CONSIDERED



Jason DeRose

Religious liberty was one of the founding pursuits of America. Rhode Island was founded on the idea that the intermingling of religion and government damages both church and state.

JUANA SUMMERS, HOST:

To mark this country's 250th anniversary, we're bringing you stories that illustrate American life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It's a series we're calling America in Pursuit. Today, NPR religion correspondent Jason DeRose takes us to Rhode Island, where the American understanding of religious liberty has its origins.

UNIDENTIFIED CONGREGATION: (Singing, inaudible).

JASON DEROSE, BYLINE: At the First Baptist Church in America in Providence, Rhode Island, the congregation has been gathering to sing and pray for nearly 400 years. On a recent Sunday, Kiana Moore Folgo helped lead worship.

KIANA MOORE FOLGO: Good morning, church.

UNIDENTIFIED CONGREGATION: Good morning.

DEROSE: The congregation regularly remembers the contributions their founder made to the American experiment.

MOORE FOLGO: Roger Williams gathered the first Baptist Church in America in 1638 on the bedrock of religious liberty and its principle of soul freedom and the separation of church and state.

DEROSE: Soul freedom, the idea that everyone has the right to approach the divine however they'd like.

J STANLEY LEMONS: Roger Williams was a refugee from England to begin with.

DEROSE: That's First Baptist member J. Stanley Lemons, who's also a professor emeritus of American history at Rhode Island College. Williams fled England because Puritans, like himself, were being persecuted by the government and the Anglican church. He settled in Massachusetts, where he could practice his faith freely until his religious ideas evolved. He was starting to question his Puritan beliefs.

LEMONS: He soon got in trouble there and was eventually, in 1635, convicted of sedition and heresy and was going to be shipped back to England, where he probably would have been thrown into a dungeon.

DEROSE: Lemon says the same problem he faced in England, Williams faced in Massachusetts - the Bay Colony was a theocracy. So Williams fled to what is now Rhode Island.

LEMONS: Well, his heresy is partly his attack upon the right of the state and the church to be intermingled. His notion was, when the state gets involved in religion, you corrupt religion.

JOANNE SCHNEIDER: Roger's idea was, you don't want the government to besmirch the church, whereas, of course, Jefferson believed you won't want the church to besmirch the government.

DEROSE: That's congregation member and Rhode Island College history professor emerita Joanne Schneider. First Baptist is filled with artifacts from colonial America - cannonballs, spittoons. She points to one tarnished item locked behind glass.

SCHNEIDER: The teapot on top was donated by Roger Williams' granddaughter, and now she claimed it was Roger's teapot.

DEROSE: But Schneider says, more interesting than these objects are Williams' ideas, far ahead of his time.

SCHNEIDER: So Roger wrote this pamphlet that said, Jews are children of God, and they should be allowed the full rights and privileges. Well, that document became the reason why Rhode Island today houses the oldest standing synagogue in North America.

JAMES HERSTOFF: (Chanting in Hebrew).

DEROSE: That house of worship, Touro Synagogue, is about an hour south of Providence in Newport, Rhode Island.

HERSTOFF: (Chanting in Hebrew).

DEROSE: Helping lead morning prayers here is retired dermatologist James Herstoff.

(SOUNDBITE OF LOCK CLICKING)

DEROSE: He unlocks the ark and draws back the curtain...

(SOUNDBITE OF CURTAIN BEING DRAWN)

DEROSE: ...Revealing the congregation's Torahs, each of which is decorated with an ornamental shield.

HERSTOFF: This breastplate with the stones on it - one precious piece of stone representative of each of the original 12 tribes - this is my favorite breastplate, personally.

DEROSE: Now in his 80s, Herstoff has been worshipping at Touro Synagogue his entire life. He points to a chair near the side wall.

HERSTOFF: My earliest memories are as a little child the night before Yom Kippur at the services with my father - that's where his seat was - and curling up there and occasionally may be falling asleep. I had to be about 5 or 6 years old then.

DEROSE: In his long experience as a Jew in America, he values the contributions Rhode Island has made to the idea of religious liberty, especially now.

HERSTOFF: Unfortunately, there are concerns with the increase in antisemitism in this country or around the world, for that matter. And it is always, of course, on one's mind and how to guard against them or prepare for them.

DEROSE: Herstoff says this value of religious liberty is sometimes misunderstood.

HERSTOFF: More than just being tolerant of other people, it's respecting them.

DEROSE: Do you get the sense that there isn't much respect these days in America?

HERSTOFF: I think that that is a major problem in the country.

DEROSE: But not a new one. Longtime congregation member Aaron Israel Ginsburg regularly gives tours of his synagogue and points out that in 1790, Jewish leaders here in Newport sent a letter to President George Washington asking if their community would be OK in this new country. Here's Ginsburg reading from that letter.

AARON ISRAEL GINSBURG: (Reading) Behold a government erected by the majesty of the people, a government which gives to bigotry no sanctions, to persecution no assistance.

That's the most famous phrase.

DEROSE: And Ginsburg says Washington's reply went beyond tolerance.

GINSBURG: (Reading) It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it is by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherit natural rights.

JEROME COPULSKY: Toleration is when the government grants a privilege. It could be taken away.

DEROSE: Religion scholar Jerome Copulsky is author of the book, "American Heretics: Religious Adversaries Of Liberal Order."

COPULSKY: Religious liberty, on the other hand, is an innate right, and it's irrevocable. It's an inalienable right. The political theory is that governments are instituted by human beings to protect natural rights. That is the fundamental purpose of government.

DEROSE: Copulsky says that while it would take many years before Jews were fully incorporated into American public life. This letter to the Touro Synagogue was groundbreaking.

COPULSKY: Washington is writing to this community and saying you guys are completely part of this political project of the United States.

(SOUNDBITE OF FOOTSTEPS)

JAMIE WASHAM: Just watch your step.

DEROSE: Back in Providence at the First Baptist Church in America, senior minister Jamie Washam is taking me up steep stairs to the pulpit.

WASHAM: There's a lot of steps going up, and there's even more going down.

DEROSE: Washam is the 37th settled minister here. Roger Williams was the first. In the pulpit, she stands high above the sanctuary.

WASHAM: I feel as though sometimes I can look out into the pews and see this palimpsest of who has sat here over the years and who has prayed here, and I feel

like it's sort of soaked into the wood and have left this place better than they found it.

DEROSE: I asked her to reflect on Roger Williams at this moment when America seems to be growing less tolerant. She points to a passage from the letter of First John in the New Testament.

WASHAM: The people who say they love God but hate their brother or sister are liars because how can you love the God you cannot see if you will not love the brother or sister that you can see?

DEROSE: An invitation, she says, to care for neighbors through service and respect.

WASHAM: Jesus would say love God and love the one right in front of you. And Roger Williams would insist that forced worship stinks in God's nostrils.

DEROSE: Because religious liberty, Washam says, makes possible abundant life and the pursuit of happiness.

Jason DeRose, NPR News, Providence.

(SOUNDBITE OF IMOGEN HEAP SONG, "TIDAL")

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