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Parliamentary Patent, 1643

In 1643, seven years after founding the town of Providence, Roger Williams sailed back to England seeking a patent that would unite the new settlements of Providence, Portsmouth and Newport. He succeeded, obtaining a Parliamentary Patent that incorporated the towns, naming them “the incorporation of Providence Plantations in Narragansett Bay in New England.” The patent protected the towns from encroachment from neighboring colonies, provided for self-government, and expressly focused on the Plantation’s civil laws. It was an important precursor to the Royal Charter that followed 20 years later.

WHEREAS by an Ordinance of the Lords and Commons, now assembled in Parliament, bearing Date the Second Day of November, Anno Domini 1643, Robert Earl of Warwick, is constituted, and ordained Governor in Chief, and Lord High Admiral of all those Islands and other Plantations inhabited or planted by, or belonging to any His Majesty the King of England's subjects, (or which hereafter may be inhabited and planted by, or belonging to them,) within the Bounds, and upon the Coasts of America. And whereas the said Lords have thought fit, and thereby ordained, that Philip Earl of Pembroke, Edward Earl of Manchester, William Viscount Say and Seal, Philip Lord Wharton, John Lord:Rolle, Members of the House of Peers. Sir Gilbert Gerrard, Baronet, Sir Arthur Haslerig, Baronet, Sir Henry Vane, jun. Knight, Sir Benjamin Rudyard, Knight, John Pim, Oliver Cromwell, Dennis Bond, Miles Corbet, Cornelius Holland, Samuel Vassal, John Rolle, and William Spurstow, Esqs, Members of the House of Commons, should be Commissioners, to join in Aid and Assistance with the said Earl.

The Earl of Warwick led the Commission on Foreign Plantations. The city of Warwick was named for him.

These are the Commission members.

And whereas for the better Government and Defense, it is thereby ordained, that the aforesaid Governor and Commissioners, or the greater Number of them, shall have Power and Authority from Time to Time to nominate, appoint, and constitute all such subordinate Governors, Counsellors, Commanders, Officers, and Agents, as they shall judge to be best affected, and most fit and serviceable for the said Islands and Plantations; and to provide for, order and dispose all Things, which they shall, from Time to Time, find most advantageous for the said Plantations; and for the better Security of the Owners and Inhabitants thereof, to assign, ratify, and confirm, so much of their afore-mentioned Authority and Power, and in such Manner, and to

This describes the Commission’s responsibility.

This transcript is intended to capture the substance of the document.

For details of capitalization, punctuation, spelling and spacing, we recommend consulting the original document.

such Persons as they shall judge to be fit for the better governing and preserving of the said Plantations and Islands, from open Violences and Private Disturbances and Distractions.

And whereas there is a Tract of Land in the Continent of America aforesaid, called by the Name of the Narraganset-Bay; bordering Northward and Northeast on the Patent of the Massachusetts, East and Southeast on Plymouth Patent, South on the Ocean, and on the West and Northwest by the Indians called Nahigganneucks, alias Narragansets; the whole Tract extending about Twenty-five English Miles unto the Pequot River and Country.

This describes the area protected by the patent.

And whereas divers well affected and industrious English Inhabitants, of the Towns of Providence, Portsmouth, and Newport in the tract aforesaid, have adventured to make a nearer neighborhood and Society with the great Body of the Narragansets, which may in time by the blessing of God upon their Endeavours, lay a sure foundation of Happiness to all America. And have also purchased, and are purchasing of and amongst the said Natives, some other Places, which may be convenient both for Plantations, and also for building of Ships Supply of Pipe Staves and other Merchandize.

Inhabitants of the first three towns purchased land and made "society" with the indigenous people.

And whereas the said English, have represented their Desire to the said Earl, and Commissioners, to have their hopeful beginnings approved and confirmed, by granting unto them a free Charter of Civil Incorporation and Government; that they may order and govern their Plantation in such a Manner as to maintain Justice and peace, both among themselves, and towards all Men with whom they shall have to do.

Settlers wished to have the approval and protection of England.

In due Consideration of the said Premises, the said Robert Earl of Warwick, Governor in Chief, and Lord High Admiral of the said Plantations, and the greater Number of the said Commissioners, whose Names and Seals are here under-written and subjoined, out of a Desire to encourage the good Beginnings of the said Planters, Do, by the Authority of the aforesaid Ordinance of the Lords and Commons, give, grant and confirm, to the aforesaid Inhabitants of the Towns of Providence, Portsmouth, and Newport, a free and absolute Charter of Incorporation, to be known by the Name of the Incorporation of Providence Plantations, in the Narraganset-Bay, in New-England. Together with full Power and Authority to rule themselves, and such others as shall hereafter inhabit within any Part of the said Tract of land, by such a Form of Civil Government, as by voluntary consent of all, or the greater Part of them, they shall find most suitable to their Estate and Condition; and, for that End, to make and ordain such Civil Laws and Constitutions, and to inflict such punishments upon Transgressors, and for Execution thereof, so to place, and

The land protected by the Patent was named "Providence Plantations in Narragansett Bay."

The Plantations were permitted to have their own civil government. The patent had no rules about religion.

displace Officers of Justice, as they, or the greater Part of them, shall by free Consent agree unto.

Provided nevertheless that the said Laws, Constitutions, and Punishments, for the Civil Government of the said Plantations be conformable to the Laws of England, so far as the Nature and Constitution of the place will admit. And always reserving to the said Earl, and Commissioners, and their successors, Power and Authority so to dispose the general government of that as it stands in reference to the rest of the Plantations in America as they shall commissionate from time to time most conducing to the general good of the said Plantations, the Honour of his Majesty, and the Service of the State.

And the said Earl and Commissioners, do further authorize, that the aforesaid Inhabitants, for the better transacting of their public Affairs to make and use a public Seal of the known Seal of Providence-Plantations, in the Narraganset-Bay, in New-England.

In Testimony whereof, the said Robert Earl of Warwick, and Commissioners, have hereunto set their Hands and Seals, the Fourteenth Day of March, in the Nineteenth Year of the Reign of our Sovereign-Lord King Charles, and in the Year of our Lord God, 1643.

ROBERT WARWICK
PHILIP PEMBROKE
SAY and SEAL
P. WHARTON
ARTHUR HASEERIG
COR. HOLLAND
H. VANE
SAM VASSAL
JOHN ROME
MILES CORBET
W. SPURSTOW

The laws in Providence Plantations would be similar to English laws “so far as the nature and constitution of the place will admit.” This clause meant that the Plantation did not have to make laws about religion.

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