



***Newport, Rhode Island was founded in 1639 by religious dissidents who believed in the principle of soul liberty: the right of each person to their own religious beliefs. This sense of tolerance was more inclusive than was common anywhere else at the time and was codified in Rhode Island's royal charter of 1662. Consequently, Newport was extremely religiously diverse, with over a dozen different congregations abiding together by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century.***

### African Spirituality

In perhaps one of the most underappreciated currents of faith in colonial-era Newport, many holdovers of African spiritual belief and practice are likely to have been reserved among both the enslaved and free African populations. Traditional West African spirituality possess complex cosmologies, which guide individuals and communities. More than simply a set of religious practices, these beliefs are not separate from everyday individual or community life, and form part of a holistic approach towards every-day existence and spirituality. A single Creator is honored through reverence towards ancestors, as well as divinities who serve as intermediaries between humanity and the Creator. When Africans were brought around the world in slavery, part of the trauma of their enslavement was the loss of homeland, and a loss of connection with their ancestors and divinities (and hence, the Creator) through daily living and spiritual practice. Because West African spirituality is inclusive, however, many enslaved converts to Christianity maintained a uniquely "African" element to their faith, which may have distinguished their religious practice in colonial Newport.

### The Religious Society of Friends

Quakers are a Protestant Christian "dissenting" movement which originated in England in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The adherents of this new form of Christian worship were persecuted by Anglicans, the established Church of England, for their emphasis on non-hierarchical religious worship. They believe that every person is capable of a direct relationship with the divine presence through "the light within," rather than worship that requires an established clergy. Quakers arrived in the New World in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, but quickly came into conflict with the government of Puritan Massachusetts. Quakers were welcomed in Rhode Island, and several early governors were adherents of the Society of Friends. Believing in plain speech, unadorned dress, and simple, honest methods of living, Quakers nonetheless became very successful in business and often quite wealthy. Many members of the Society of Friends participated in the slave trade which undergirded the entire colonial economy. However, by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, they began to evolve towards a commitment that slavery was immoral.

### Baptists

Baptists comprise a broad swath of Protestant Christian sects. The theological origins of the Baptist movement first begin to emerge in the early 1600s among "Separatist" sects of worshippers, who felt the Church of England was too compromised by its traditionalist structure. With an emphasis on "salvation by faith alone" and a rejection of infant baptism in favor of baptizing adults (thus providing their popular name), Baptists took a hardline interpretation of holy scripture. Considered heretical by the Puritans of Massachusetts, a large number of Baptists, led by John Clarke, and others, would flee to Aquidneck Island and help to form what would eventually grow into the city of Newport. Clarke was a strong proponent of what was then termed "soul-liberty," which we refer to today as freedom of conscience, or freedom of religion. His work with Roger Williams, and the Baptist principles of separation of secular and religious authority, would prove to be influential in the development of the Charter of Rhode Island, and eventually, the US Constitution.

### Congregationalists

Descended from the Puritan movement of the 1600s, Congregationalist churches had become one of the most common religious institutions in New England by the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Congregationalists take their name from their practice of each congregation governing itself, autonomous from any central hierarchy. Many leading figures of the Revolutionary War came from within this tradition. Ezra Stiles, who later went on to be president of Yale University, served as the minister of the Second Congregational Church in Newport, seen in the image above. Samuel Hopkins, minister of the First Congregational Church, was noted for preaching against slavery.

### Sephardic Jewish Population

Judaism, one of the oldest extant faiths, is practiced all over the world. The Jewish community of Newport was one of the first established in the Americas; Jewish families from Spain and Portugal who fled to the Caribbean to escape persecution were attracted to Newport in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by the promise of religious toleration. The connections between families still in the West Indies and those who moved to Rhode Island would play a crucial role in developing Newport as a major center of Atlantic trade. In 1790, Moses Seixas exchanged letters with George Washington, thanking him for cementing religious toleration into early American government.

### Anglicanism (Church of England)

The Anglican Church, or Church of England, is the established state religion of the Kingdom of Great Britain. Formed during the English Reformation, it eventually crystallized elements of Protestant theology, Scottish Presbyterianism, and the liturgical forms of the Catholic Church. Though Anglicanism was the state-sanctioned religion of the British Colonies, Rhode Island was a notable exception. Newport's Anglican community, who worshipped at Trinity Church, would number several notable Loyalists amongst its membership. During the British occupation of the city from 1776-1779, Trinity Church would be one of the only religious buildings not slighted or damaged by the forces quartered in the city.

### Moravians

The Moravians, one of the oldest Protestant sects in the world, can trace their history back to the 1400s, nearly a century before the Protestant Reformation. With origins in Bohemia (present day Czech Republic), the followers of the "Unity of the Brethren" fled to what is now Germany in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to escape religious and political persecution. They were some of the first Protestants to send lay-missionaries to other countries, and sent multiple ministries to the New World. Missionaries sought to attract Native Americans and enslaved people to Christianity, which set the Moravians apart from other Protestant sects. A belief in the simplicity of faith, as well as fellowship in community, led to a strong, as well as highly musical, presence here in colonial Newport.