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NOTES

CONCERNING

ROGER WILLIAMS.

By ALMON D. HODGES, JR.

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NOTES CONCERNING ROGER WILLIAMS.

By ALMON D. HODGES, Jr.

A.—DATE OF HIS BIRTH.

No record giving the exact date of birth of Roger Williams has been found, and estimates have varied from 1598 to 1607. The earlier date is that of the tradition prevailing at Providence about a century after the event; the later is a deduction of Oscar S. Straus in his life of Roger Williams published in 1894.

In two instances Roger Williams left on record important statements concerning his age. These statements, and the circumstances attendant upon his admission to Charter House School, afford the only data as yet discovered for forming conclusions as to the year of his birth.

In the testimony of Roger Williams in favor of Richard Smith's title to the Wickford lands, is the following: "Nahiggonsik, 24 July 1679 (ut vulgo). I Roger Wjlljams of Providence . . . being now neere to Foure Score years of age." [*R. I. Hist. Soc. Coll. iii: 166.*]

It is evident that Williams here asserted that he was under 80 years of age; and the assumption of Mr. Straus, that he was "over three score and ten, and therefore, counting his age by scores, he would naturally use the expression he did," is extremely plausible. According to this testimony, it is certain that Roger Williams was born after July 24, 1599, and probable that he was born before July 24, 1609.

Letter of Roger Williams to Gov. John Winthrop: "Plymouth. [No date.] Only let me craue a word of explanation: *among other pleas for a young counsellour . . . you argue from 25 in a Church Elder: tis a ridle as yet to me whether you meane any Elder in these New English churches . . . or the Levites who served from 25 to 50 . . . or my selfe but a child in euery thing, (though in Christ called & persecuted euen in & out of my fathers howse these 20 years), I am no Elder in any church . . . & yet if I at present were, I should be in the dayes of my vanitie neerer vpwards of 30 then 25.* . . . You lately sent musick to our eares, when we heard you perswaded . . . our beloved Mr. Nowell to surrender vp one sword.*" [*4 Mass. Hist. Soc. Coll. vi: 184.*]

This letter is undated, but its date can be placed at July to October, 1632, from its reference to Mr. Nowell which relates, accord-

* All italics are mine.—A. D. H., Jr.

ing to all authorities, to the resignation by Increase Nowell of his office of Elder, as a result of the vote of the churches that a person ought not to be a civil magistrate and a ruling elder at the same time. Gov. Winthrop, in his *History of New England*, i: 81, under date of July [1 to 4] 1632, records this vote, and in the same *History*, i: 91, under date of Oct. 25, 1632, describes his visit to Plymouth. The letter was written, evidently, between these two dates.

The expression "nearer upwards of 30 than 25" is somewhat obscure and has been variously interpreted. The earlier commentators, probably influenced by the traditional date of birth, 1598, supposed it might mean simply *over 30*, but this is a strained interpretation. Mr. Straus, on the other hand, considers it "another way of saying he was over 25 and under 30, or nearer to 30 than 25 is to 30, that is to say, he was between 25 and 26," which last, in common parlance, means 25 years old. This also is a strained interpretation. Surely the whole argument is to the effect that he was considerably past this age. To my mind, the fair interpretation of the expression, taken with its context, is that he was nearer to 30 years of age than he was to 25, or that he was over 27½ years old, and hence born not later than April, 1605.

The following evidence seems to prove that Roger Williams was elected a Pensioner of the Charter House School June 25, 1621.

Mrs. Sadleir, the daughter of Sir Edward Coke, the great lawyer and legal writer, in a note appended to a letter of Roger Williams addressed to her, wrote: "This Roger Williams, when he was a youth, would, in a short hand, take sermons and speeches in the Star Chamber, and present them to my dear father. He, seeing so hopeful a youth, took such liking to him that he sent him in to Sutton's Hospital, and he was the second that was placed there." Ms. letters of Roger Williams to Mrs. Sadleir, in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge. [*Narragansett Club Pub. vi: 252.*]

The records of Sutton's Hospital, now the Charter House, furnish no other particulars [concerning Roger Williams] than the following—that Roger Williams was elected a scholar of that institution June 25, 1621, and that he obtained an "exhibition" July 9, 1624. [*Elton's Life of Roger Williams, p. 11.*]

I have had the records of the Charter House searched anew. In addition to the entry that Roger Williams was elected a scholar June 25, 1621 (being "the second scholar placed there" by Sir Edward Coke, not the second scholar who was admitted) is the following under date of 1629: "Roger Williams who hath exhibition and so far about five years past, has forsaken the university and is become discontinuer of his studies there. Exhibition suspended until order to the contrary." By the rules of Sutton's Hospital School no scholars could be admitted under 10 or over 14 years. [*Roger Williams. By Oscar S. Straus. 1894. Pp. 8, 9.*]

From the rules and from his interpretation of the words "nearer upwards of 30 than 25," Mr. Straus concludes that Roger Williams was born in 1607.

If the rules as to age of admission were carried out strictly in the

case of Roger Williams, even under the assumption that one was not considered "over 14" until he was 15, then Roger Williams could not have been born earlier than June 26, 1606. And this disagrees with my deduction from Williams's own statement in the letter to Gov. Winthrop, that he was born not later than April, 1605.

It seems to me therefore necessary to assume, either that Roger Williams described his age inaccurately, or that the rule was liberally construed in his case. Either assumption is possible, but to my mind the latter is more probable. Sir Edward Coke not only was a Governor of the Charter House, but also by his legal ability had saved the foundation when it was assailed by Sutton's heirs; and it appears to me very probable that a protégé of his would be admitted, even if above the customary age.

In view of the foregoing I incline strongly to the opinion that Roger Williams was born in, or very near to, the year 1604. If this was the case, then he was 74 or 75 years old when he called himself "neere to Foure Score years"; about 28 years old when "nearer upwards of 30 than 25"; 16 or 17 years old when elected a scholar of Charter House School; 22 or 23 years old when he took his degree at Pembroke College; and 78 or possibly 79 years old when he died. Moreover he would have been 16 years old when he "in a short hand took sermons and speeches in the Star Chamber," if (as the note of Mrs. Sadleir implies) he did this before entering Charter House,—a much more probable age than that of 13 which follows from the computation of Mr. Straus.

B.—DATE OF HIS DEATH.

Whereas there hath of long time been a difference betweene the Towne of Providence & the 13 Proprietors of Pautuxet, who Originally were *Roger Williams*, William Arnold, Thomas James, John Greene, John Throckmorton, William Harris, Thomas Olney, Richard Waterman, Francis Weston, Ezechiell Holliman, Robert Coles, Stukley Westcott & *William Carpenter*, as Concerning y^e deviding of the lands of Pautuxet belonging to the said 13 Proprietors from the Gennerall Comon of the aforesd Towne of Providence: And whereas severall of the said Proprietors are deceased & the sd difference yet Remaneth [a settlement is agreed upon. Signed by]

| | | |
|--|--|------------------|
| Roger Williams | Benjamin Carpenter | Susanna Harris |
| Nathaniell Waterman | Howlong Harris | Jeremaah Rhoades |
| Silas Carpenter | William Carpenter | Peleg Rhoades |
| Thomas ffield | with my Consent my two sons have subscribed: | |
| [and also by five Trustees on the part of the town of Providence.] | | |

Dated 16 January 1682:83.—Recorded May 24: 1705 in the Third Book Town of Providence, pp. 167, 168. [*Early Providence Records*, iv: 73-76.]

January y^e 27th: 168²/₃. Voated y^t y^e Bond Given by m^r. Roger Williams m^r. Thomas ffield & John Thornton Concerning Sarah Neals being chargeable to y^e towne by herselfe or child he delivered up to y^e said persons.—Town Meeting Records, p. 70.—[*Early Providence Records*, viii: 122, 123.]

On April 25, 1683, William Carpenter executed a deed wherein he called himself the last survivor of the 13 proprietors of Pawtuxet lands; and as Roger Williams was one of these proprietors, he must have been dead at this date. [*Providence Deeds*, i: 260.]

From the above it is clear that Roger Williams died in February, March or April, 1683. Rev. Isaac Backus so asserted in the first edition of his *History of New England*, i: 515, published in 1777. In his *Abridgement of the Church History of New England*, p. 130, published in 1804, Mr. Backus stated that Roger Williams died in April, 1683.

C.—MAIDEN NAME OF HIS WIFE.

The record of the births of the children "of Roger Williams and Mary his wife," on page 5 of the "First Book of Providence,"* proves that Mary was the mother of all the children.

That Mary's maiden name was probably *Warnerd* or *Warnard*, is shown by the following extract from a letter written by William Harris to one Capt. Dean under date of Providence, 14th of November, 1666, copied by Moses Brown,† and printed about 1896 in a leaflet entitled "Some William Harris Memoranda." The letter relates almost entirely to Roger Williams.

"I have sent you a first and second Bill of £23, 10/ stg in Two Several letters, I left the letters with one Mr. Warnerd, who knows your Self, he is Brother [*Query*, own brother?] to Mr. Williams's Wife, the said Mr. Warnard. . . . Yours Always [signed] William Harris." Appended to the letter is the following: "Note. I copied this from an original in William Harris's hand writing, now in my possession, 3^d mo. 18th, and compared it carefully and made it as exact a copy as I could with the assistance of a younger person. [Signed] Moses Brown."

The following letter contains valuable information concerning the "Memoranda" and other documents.

POMFRET, [Conn.] Oct. 30, 1898.

Dear Sir: "Some William Harris Memoranda" were printed two or three years ago to preserve the contents of some old and dilapidated documents then in my possession.

The original letter to Capt. Dean is lost.—probably destroyed when the Jenkins residence burned, forty or fifty years ago. Mrs. Jenkins was Moses Brown's sole heir.

William J. Harris, nephew of Mr. Brown's fourth wife, lived with his uncle and was one of his executors; likewise was the "younger person" who assisted Moses in making his copy of the Dean letter. He made the copy which I have in my possession and from which that in the leaflet was printed. I then had the Moses Brown copy also, but it was very dilapidated.

I am not able to fix the date of the Moses Brown copy. He died in 1836 nearly 98 years old.

All the "Memoranda" papers (except the W. J. H. copy of the Dean letter) are owned by Mrs. M. E. Harris Cushman, daughter of William J.

* Early Records of Providence, R. I. By the Record Commissioners, i: 7.

† Moses^s Brown (James⁴, James³, John², Chad¹), b. 1738. Sept. 23; d. 1836, Sept. 6.

Harris. She has also many interesting documents,—original letters of William Harris, and Andrew Harris's copies of the "captivity letters," the originals of which were probably sent to England and lost on the way.

Yours very truly,

ROBERT HARRIS.

D.—ADDITION TO A LETTER OF ROGER WILLIAMS.

Rev. Isaac Backus, when writing his *History of the Baptists in New England*, collected and copied a number of documents formerly belonging to Rev. Samuel Hubbard of Newport, R. I. The manuscript of Mr. Backus was loaned by Rev. C. E. Barrows of Newport, in July, 1880, to Ray Greene Huling, Esq. (now master of the English High School of Cambridge, Mass.), who copied the manuscript before returning it.

In vol. i. pp. 510, 511, of Mr. Backus's *History*, first edition, is a letter written by Roger Williams to Mr. Hubbard, which has been reprinted in vol. vi. pp. 361, 362, of the *Narragansett Club Publications*, where the editor assigns to the letter the date of 1672. This letter, as printed, is incomplete, as shown by the following note of Mr. Backus, copied by Mr. Huling:

In my history, vol. i. p. 511, near the bottom, add [to the letter of Roger Williams] "at present (to repay your kindness & because you are studious) I pray you to request my brother Williams, or my son Providence, or my daughter Hart, to spare you the sight of a memorial in verse which I lately writ, in humble thanksgiving unto God, for his great & wonderful deliverance to my son Providence. I pray salute." His meaning [adds Mr. Backus, but without due thought] in repaying was, Mr. Hubbard had wrote something upon his son's death, which he lent Mr. Williams, which he now returned.



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