

William Blackstone, the "First Settler" of Boston and Rhode Island

By JOHN WILLIAMS HALEY

HISTORIANS writing of Rhode Island are sometimes prone to forget that there was a white settler in Rhode Island territory before the advent of either Roger Williams in the north or William Coddington in the south. Yet this settler has given a name to a valley, a river, a town and a canal in Rhode Island, and had probably lived for ten years in America, most of the time in Boston, before he finally came to Rhode Island in 1635 and established himself at Study Hill in the vicinity of what is now known as Cumberland, before Roger Williams in 1636 and William Coddington in 1637, with their respective bands of followers, came from the Massachusetts Colony to settle in the wilderness, one at the head and the other at the mouth of Narragansett Bay.

Nor did the coming of these two groups at all affect the status of their predecessor, William Blackstone, generally regarded as an eccentric religious recluse, who had already lived a whole year on his chosen site at Study Hill where he had fairly rooted himself to the spot, as if to follow in part the example of his transplanted apple trees. But he did make occasional pilgrimages to Boston and to Providence, journeying to the former settlement with a predominance of personal motives but to the latter with only the highest spirit of altruism. Though he was by nature a voluntary recluse, he did not become feeble in intelligence or lax in ideals, but remained

an astute philosopher and tolerant clergyman throughout his days.

Nothing is known of William Blackstone's early life in England. Even the date of his birth has been lost in the shadow of the more famous Sir William Blackstone of legal fame who may or may not have been a blood relation. The first records of this earliest Rhode Island settler are those which state that he received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Emanuel College, Cambridge, in 1617, and his Master of Arts degree in 1621. Just when or how he came to New England (called then New Virginia) is not known, but the year of his arrival in America has been estimated as 1625. He settled first in Boston on what was then called Shawmut Point. This area included the territory now known as Beacon Hill and extended along the south side of the Charles River. Blackstone lived here alone through 1629.

In 1630 Winthrop and his group of colonists arrived from England and established themselves on the north side of the Charles at a spot where Charlestown is now located. When many of the little colony fell sick because of a lack of pure water, Blackstone crossed the river and invited them to make their homes within his territory where there were several large and untainted springs. It must have been with a good deal of surprise that these new settlers from England greeted this hospitable stranger, for they hardly expected to find another of their kind already established in the land they had

supposed to be an absolute wilderness. But while William Blackstone had also left England to escape the tyranny of the potentates of the English Church he was not at odds with the original principles of the English Episcopal Church. He still wore, in America, his English clergyman's costume and for that reason gave offense to the Puritans of Boston.

There is a tradition that Winthrop and his party at first had planned to oust Blackstone from his territory at Shawmut on the pretext of having a grant to the land from the King. Blackstone is said to have replied to their contention: "The king asserteth sovereignty over this New Virginia in respect that John and Sebastian Cabot sailed along the coast without ever landing at any place; and if the quality of sovereignty can subsist upon the substratum of mere inspection, surely the quality of property can subsist upon that actual occupancy which is my claim." Whether Blackstone made such a statement or not, the words are characteristic of both his ingenious logic and his independence. At last in 1634 the members of the Boston Colony finally paid him six shillings a piece for his rights to the land, although he retained six acres for his own use. On this bit of land he had his home where he raised apples and roses brought over from England. Surrounding the house was his park, now Boston Common, and here he used to walk in the afternoons.

Although Blackstone remained in the Boston Colony for five years, he finally had to leave, not because of any open outbreak with the colonists but because he would not join with them. According to Cotton Mather, Blackstone said: "I came from England because I did not like the lord-bishops, but I cannot join

with you because I would not be under the lord-brethren."

Blackstone saw that there was intolerance both within and without the church, and wished to follow his sequestered life of contemplation and study. In 1635 he invested his small capital in cattle, and dressed in his "canonically Coate" and carrying his beloved books set out through the wilderness with but one companion, a servant named Abbot, from whom Abbot's Run in Cumberland takes its name.

He finally came to a place which the Indians called Wawepooseag. Here he settled in a territory which was without a white inhabitant. In what was then a part of Rehoboth but is now Cumberland, near Lonsdale, he built a home. It was located at the foot of a three-terraced hill. On the second terrace he dug a well and at the top built a shelter which he used as a study. Consequently the hill became known as Study Hill. Later the section came to be known as "Attleborough Gore." Always a lover of gardens and orchards, he here planted fresh shoots from his Boston apple trees and slips from his English rosebushes.

As a recluse he pursued his philosophical bent thoroughly. He had a very large library for the times, consisting of eighty-six volumes. The books, as well as his own philosophical writings, were destroyed when the Indians burned his home during their uprising after his death in 1675. He had no trouble with the Indians during his lifetime of eighty years. At his death there were one hundred and sixty inhabitants in the vicinity of Study Hill, and it is supposed that he used to preach for their church services. But, in the main, Blackstone remained absolutely alone in regard to church affili-

ations, and it is probably for that reason that he is neglected in many histories. His motto always was "tolerance" in the real sense of the word, and even Roger Williams could not measure against him in that respect. A singular man, he might, under different circumstances, have been a great leader in New England. Ahead of his time, he would probably have been a close friend of Bishop Berkeley, another deep philosopher.

Blackstone, despite his eccentricities as a recluse, did not remain single all his life. He frequently made journeys to Boston, riding on a bull, and finally won the hand of Sarah Stevenson, the widow of John Stevenson. In 1659 they were married by Governor Endicott, Blackstone preferring a magistrate to a minister of the Boston Church to which he would not join. Mrs. Stevenson already had one son named John, and when she gave the name of John to the son of her second marriage, she caused much later confusion of records. John Stevenson, Blackstone's stepson, was given fifty acres of Blackstone's two-hundred-acre farm at Study Hill after the latter's death. The other son, John Blackstone, became somewhat dissipated for awhile, squandering his heritage of land, but he finally settled down to a respectable life in Branford, Connecticut, where his descendants acquired a high place in public esteem. There is an unsubstantiated report that a grandson of Blackstone was killed at the siege of Louisburg.

Mrs. Blackstone died in 1673, two years before her husband, and both were

buried at the foot of Study Hill. The personal estate of Blackstone was meager, being but forty pounds. He had never acquired a great amount of money, but his simple tastes and his mental tranquility were never disturbed by a lean larder. Stephen Hopkins, writing for the *Providence Gazette*, said: "Mr. Blackstone used frequently to come to Providence to preach the Gospel." This, however, was when he was quite old. He could not walk easily and rode a bull on these journeys. Though a radical in the eyes of many of the old, he was much beloved by the children to whom he used to bring sweet apples, the first they had ever seen, from his orchard at Study Hill. Governor Hopkins, again writing of Blackstone, in 1765, said "Many of the trees which he planted about 150 years ago are still pretty, thrifty fruit-bearing trees."

This, then, is the story of William Blackstone, the first white inhabitant of Boston, and later of Rhode Island. A keen thinker, a true apostle of the highest religion, of rugged character and unflinching purpose, he maintained his ideals in the face of obstacles to which a weaker man might have succumbed. A truly great man of God, despite his eccentricities, he may well be proudly hailed by Rhode Island—as well as by Boston—as their first settler. A friend of Roger Williams, of the Massachusetts magistrates and of the Indian chieftains, Massasoit and Miantanomi, he held to his inspired conceptions of tolerance until his death.