



E Pluribus Unum: Out of Many, One Rhode Island

By Keith W. Stokes for the Rhode Island Civil Rights Roundtable
January 15, 2008

The simple intention of my presentation is to provide a historical context to my premise that the intent of Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin in founding a new nation and Roger Williams, John Clarke and Ann Hutchinson in founding a new colony was not to melt all races, ethnicities and religions into one melted pot of stew or to create a nation of one language, one religion or one culture. On the contrary, their enlighten vision was to create a unique government that would recognize the challenges of seeking national unity while respecting individual and group diversity. This government promotion of diversity would attract many foreign born who would bring originality and imagination to American and Rhode Island economic, cultural, religious and civic life.

The guiding premise to my presentation is that resisting the newest wave of the foreign born seeking to become a part of the Rhode Island and American dream is historically un-American in theory and practice. Most importantly, I will offer the conclusion that the newest wave of foreign born in America and Rhode Island, with the proper supportive national and state public policies, will become the next wave of significant social, political and economic contributors to our great country and state as did the immigrants of the past 400 years.

Let me begin by stating I will not use the offensive term "illegal aliens." This will not be a discussion about ET, War of the Worlds, Mars Attacks, or aliens as if from another world, but flesh and blood persons and families struggling to create a better life, like most of our ancestors before us. The more appropriate description I will use is simply "undocumented residents."

The facts are clear that the undocumented residents that have entered and reside in our country and state illegally, are mostly law abiding and have come for the same reasons as nearly all of our ancestors before us – seeking to build a better life for themselves and families. Those that break laws, legal or illegal residents, should be dealt with as all lawbreakers are; with all due process.

Most importantly, my intent tonight is not to provide specific remedies for immigration reform in our state or nation, but to provide a historical framework set forth over the last four centuries by our founding framers of the United States and Rhode Island

Constitutions who understood the future of America and Rhode Island will firmly rest on the shoulders of future immigrants who would come to our shores and build our great state and nation.

Perhaps Rhode Island's (and America's) earliest test of immigration acceptance and recognition occurred less than fifty years after the settlement of the Colony when a group of Sephardic Jewish families landed in Newport in 1658 seeking religious asylum. These Jews, whose first language was Portuguese and Ladino, had fled the recently conquered Brazil by the Portuguese who had demanded that all residents become members of the Catholic Church or face the penalties of expulsion or prison. They came to Newport because they had heard of the rare opportunity for religious toleration. Unsure of their security in their adopted land, their leader, Moses Campanal asked an important question to the Rhode Island General Assembly. "Are we as Jews, accepted here in the Colony of Rhode Island?" The General Assembly met and responded on June 24, 1684 with:

"We declare that they (Jews) may expect as good protection here as any stranger being not of our nation residing amongst us in his Majesty's colony ought to have being obedient to his Majesty's laws."

The government of Rhode Island responded to this small group of Jews that there was no requirement to learn and speak only English, worship the majority religion, and assimilate to the social customs of England, but only to be lawful inhabitants of the new colony. In 2008 we in Newport celebrate not only the 350th anniversary of the arrival of these first Jews, but the recognition by our early colonial founders that residency is open to all.

Rhode Island's (and America's) next great test came after the American Revolution when the largest immigrant group in the Western Hemisphere, West African Slaves, posed an uncomfortable quandary for those who embraced the ideals of American liberty and freedom. These "Forced Immigrants," over 10 million over four centuries, had directly contributed to the building of the Americas. Rhode Island would be the 4th state that would convey the beginnings of freedom through the 1784 Emancipation Act, stating *"Whereas, all men are entitled to Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness..."* This RI government action would add freedom of race with freedom of religion.

In 1790, the Jews of Newport would press for full religious freedom, this time from the new President of the United States of America, to reaffirm their rights to American citizenship regardless of theirs or any one individual's choice of religion. Moses Seixas, Warden of the Jewish Congregation in Newport handed President Washington a personal letter on August 17, 1790 during his visit to Newport stating:

“Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer of all events behold a Government, erected by the Majesty of the People -- a Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance -- but generously affording to all Liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship: deeming every one, of whatever Nation, tongue, or language equal parts of the great governmental Machine”

And Washington on August 21, 1790 before leaving Newport gave his letter of response back to the Newport Jewish Congregation stating:

“The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent national gifts. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support”

Both Seixas and Washington knew that the future of America would be based upon a nation that values all residents on the simple requirement of good citizenship. What is most remarkable, the letters of both Seixas and Washington reflect and reaffirm the commitment of residency and citizenship as received by the Jews in Newport one hundred years before.

At the very end of the 18th century, Rhode Island amended its constitution to not only reaffirm religious freedom but expanded the people's rights through the 1798 Declaration of Rights of the People of this State:

“ The rights of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers and possessions against unreasonable searches and seizures and a guarantee of due process under the law”

What Rhode Island government leaders knew then and what we must practice today is a policy of enlightened inclusion.

Building fences around America, deporting all undocumented immigrants is not feasible, reasonable or in most cases, constitutional. A comprehensive approach to immigration reform is needed mostly at the federal level, but can be supported at the state level.

A comprehensive program should provide border security, penalize employers that knowingly hire and exploit undocumented workers, provide a well defined and consistent path to documented residency and establish a guest worker program that is directly related to the critical jobs in important industries. Here in Rhode Island and particularly my own community of Newport, that that would include hospitality and tourism.

I firmly believe that clear thinking persons do not really believe we have the economic resources and constitutional mandate to simply round up people and families, incarcerate them, and send them back to their countries. Rational persons would also agree building more prisons and security walls encircling America are not rational and affordable solutions. There is no doubt that we need comprehensive immigration reform, but not at the expense of our civil liberties and economic well-being. Any immigration reform measures passed by Congress and applied and enforced by states must respect due process, be economically viable, protect privacy, and adhere to the values of our country and our Constitution. This notion of protecting and promoting civil liberties has no better historical place than the great State of Rhode Island.

I will conclude with my last historical reference coming from one of humanity's greatest body of laws from Leviticus 19:33-34 in the Old Testament of the Bible that correctly reminds us:

“When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

Thank You.