

SUNDAY+



Amy Russo interviews Roger Williams (played by National Park Service ranger John McNiff) at the Sylvanus Brown House on the Slater Mill Historic Site in Pawtucket. PHOTOS BY DAVID DELPOIO/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

ROGER AND ME



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Going straight to the source to learn about RI: A one-on-one with founder Roger Williams

For a brief moment last month, Roger Williams came back from the dead. Dressed in a linen-lined wool getup, knee socks and a felt hat, he was seen in a Pawtucket house at a writing desk, quill pen in hand, ready to answer all of my burning questions about our state's founder. Did a tree root really grow through his corpse after he was buried?

As you may have guessed, old Roger wasn't really resurrected. But his ghost was embodied by John McNiff, a national park ranger who has been playing him for years. McNiff said I couldn't really ask Williams whether the folklore is accurate, as Williams, in theory, wouldn't know, although McNiff suspects the legend is true. But there's no consensus. Last year, the historical society indicated it might not be, dashing my hopes after I'd heard the eye-popping tale on a local ghost tour.

But McNiff is well-versed in more than just Williams' burial spot. With ease, he recounted the story of Williams' voyage from England to Boston in the early 1630s, following his disillusionment with the corruption of the Church of England, of which King Henry VIII had declared himself the head.

No, this is nothing like your high school history class. McNiff delved into Williams' thinking and his theology and offered a slice of life in those times, recounting what it was like to spend two months at sea — all of which was delivered with an accent.

McNiff described freezing temperatures, storms, rotting food, rats and tightly packed

passengers who had only the clothes on their backs, and, when they arrived, no lodgings to live in until they built them.

Yet even after a treacherous journey to Massachusetts — a place where the Puritans had sought religious freedom — that same right was denied to Williams, who relocated continuously as he was barred from preaching and eventually landed in what would become Rhode Island, where he met the Narragansett people and acquired a tract of land. He named it Providence, and on it he founded America's first Baptist church in 1639.

However, that was just the congregation. The towering white structure seen on North Main Street was not built until the following century. McNiff surmises that the church, with its grand steeple and eye-catching design, was far from what Williams — who once preached out of his home — would have envisioned.

"Whether it has a large steeple — whatever they add to it is taking away from its original purpose," McNiff, as Williams, said. "It is a meeting house. The church is the body of people."

McNiff has been getting into Williams' head for six of the 26 years he's spent with the National Park Service, having previously played early Rhode Island settler William Blackstone, about whom much less is known.

McNiff's journey here began after he tried his hand at commercial fishing and then advertising. He wasn't particularly well-suited for either.

"I don't swim, and neither did the captain,"



John McNiff has spent six of his 26 years as a park ranger offering living history lessons in character as Roger Williams. He has also portrayed early Rhode Island settler William Blackstone.

he said of the fishing venture.

"In advertising, I was tired of going in when it was dark and getting out when it was dark," McNiff added. "And so I decided I need to change this."

That's when McNiff, a Rhode Island College graduate, went to Binghamton University in upstate New York to pursue graduate studies in archaeology, which took him to projects in London and Mexico, where he recorded archaeological sites in Sonora.

In between his various career pursuits, McNiff explored theater through the Cumberland Company for the Performing Arts and spent 15 years at King Richard's Faire, New England's largest Renaissance festival, based in Carver, Massachusetts.

Getting into costume, as McNiff describes it, is the "gee-whiz factor" that catches the audience's eye, and ear, so they can learn about the history.

"It's getting people excited about the ideas that we talk about," McNiff said. "Not necessarily any of the specific incidents, but the ideas that we talk about. ... These things are just a fishing lure."

Providence Journal staff writer Amy Russo, a transplanted New Yorker, is looking for new ways to experience her adopted state. If you have suggestions for this column, email her at amrusso@providencejournal.com.



Sylvanus Brown House, the oldest building at the Slater Mill Historic site in Pawtucket, a typical dwelling of the mid-18th century.



A display of wool in the process of being spun into yarn at the Sylvanus Brown House.