

*Samuel Williams and the Formation of America's Social Contract, 1795-1804*

My project explores how Americans reimagined the social contract, or how individuals relate to their society, following the ratification of the Constitution in 1788. Historians and legal theorists often interpret ratification as the culmination of a national debate that set the new political order in place. But in the first decades after ratification, Americans—as they still do today—continued to discuss and redefine what individual rights, representation, citizenship, and other concepts should mean. My research will examine the important place of Samuel Williams (1742-1817), an influential though understudied figure, in this discussion. In the critical early years of the republic, Williams revised orthodox political theories toward the larger purpose of developing a moral vision for America. Specifically, he articulated new understandings of equality and democracy. I wish to travel to the University of Vermont in Burlington, where I can read Williams' unpublished sermons and personal correspondence kept at UVM's Special Collections. Given the correspondence headings and sermon titles, I have reason to believe that Williams expanded his political philosophy in these documents by advising congregants and friends about how to effect political change. This research is central to my American Studies honors thesis, in which I explain how Williams' thinking complicates scholarship that divides early American political philosophy too simply into categories of "liberal" and "republican."

A Vermont minister, scientist, and philosophy professor, Williams believed the social contract should take a new form in America, where government derived its legitimacy from the consent of the governed. Williams expressed his ideas in two major works, *The Natural and Civil History of the State of Vermont* (1795) and *Philosophical Lectures on the Constitution, Duty, and Religion of Man* (1804). In these texts, Williams challenged a dominant notion in contractarian political thought that people sacrificed some of their freedom when they left a pre-political state of nature to join a polity, what Williams called a "state of society."<sup>1</sup> To the contrary, Williams argued that liberty was "produced, preserved, and kept alive in the state of society."<sup>2</sup> He contended that people should strive to make the civil state harmonize with the state of nature, in which individuals possessed perfect equality and freedom. In contrast to social contract theorists like Jean Jacques Rousseau, who suggested that civil institutions corrupted individuals, Williams believed citizens should and could use their social institutions to better themselves as members of a body politic.<sup>3</sup> He even argued that citizens had a duty "to regard and observe all such means and institutions as are adapted to promote the cultivation, the improvement, and the happiness of the human race."<sup>4</sup> I think I can gain a better understanding of the policies Williams advocated by looking past his major writings and into the documents at UVM. The sermon titles and correspondence headings suggest that Williams transitioned from theorizing about the social contract to advocating tangible steps Americans could take to enhance their republic. These documents are different in nature and intent from what I have read about Williams. Thus, I believe they will strengthen my interpretation of his political vision.

Scholarship on Williams tends to focus more on his scientific achievements than his contributions to American political philosophy. Since the first six chapters of Williams' *History* provide vivid descriptions of ecological changes in New England during the eighteenth century, the eminent historian William Cronon uses this text to understand the environmental impact of westward expansion.<sup>5</sup> But Williams' theories about the environment complemented his political philosophy. As historian Ralph N. Miller argues, Williams' writings about the environment support his view that an "intimate relationship must be established between men and Nature if men are to be truly free."<sup>6</sup> Even those historians who recognize this key point in Williams' thought, however, fail to connect his philosophy to the modern social contract tradition that came

out of Europe. Intellectual historian Merle Curti tries to contextualize Williams' work, but he places Williams' ideas in a minor theological debate among New England Congregationalists. He does not account for the broader philosophical milieu that I will consider in my research.<sup>7</sup> At UVM, I will not only read documents scholars have ignored, but I will also analyze these texts in a manner that situates Williams in his rightful place as an early contractarian thinker in America.

As I read Williams' sermons and personal correspondence at UVM, I will keep several questions in mind. In his major works, Williams stressed the importance of educating citizens in a democratic-republic. Did he expand such views in the letters he wrote about chartering a university in Vermont? If so, what did he say? Given that the titles of Williams' sermons held at UVM all reference the "Philosophical Principles of Morality," did he further discuss the appropriate behavior and disposition of citizens in these documents? The finding aid for this collection also notes that Williams frequently corresponded with Yale College President Ezra Stiles about theological controversies during the 1780s and early 1790s. What did he discuss with Stiles? How did theology influence Williams' political philosophy? Additionally, UVM has Williams' correspondence with noted American physicist Benjamin Thompson. They reflected on the importance of scientific societies in a republic. Did Williams indicate why such societies were critical to republican government? Given the vast scope and relevant subject headings in this collection, I think I will be able to answer these questions by the end of my research trip.

I plan to spend five days researching Williams' papers at UVM's Special Collections. This trip will take place during Northwestern's spring break, specifically from March 19<sup>th</sup> until March 24<sup>th</sup>. I have already contacted Sylvia Bugbee, an archivist at UVM, and she has given me permission to examine the Williams materials during this time. (Please see the attached document.) I will compare the information I find in Williams' correspondence and sermons to what I have already found in his other writings. I will scan and copy archival documents where possible. I will also keep a journal of relevant findings throughout my research. I expect to find connections as well as further elaborations upon the political ideas found in his better-known works while at UVM.

This research comes at a key point in my academic career. As a double major in History and American Studies, I have devoted much of my coursework to the intellectual and cultural history of the United States. I have taken and done well in four courses that explored American history from settlement at Jamestown in 1607 through the first decades after ratification. At his invitation, I am currently enrolled in Professor Breen's graduate seminar on Early American history, which has already enriched my understanding of seventeenth and eighteenth-century America. In addition, I have taken a total of four courses on moral and political philosophy—both at NU and during my junior year abroad at Oxford University—that have given me a thorough grounding in the major intellectual debates of the Early Modern period.

My project will benefit me in the near and short terms. Under Professor Breen's direction, I am writing a senior honors thesis in American Studies that examines how Williams and his contemporary Nathaniel Chipman pushed American contractarian thought in new directions. I plan to include my findings at UVM in the thesis, which is due on May 1<sup>st</sup>. Moreover, this project will prepare me for graduate level work in history. After teaching high school history for two years as a Teach for America corps member in Oakland, CA, I plan to enter a history doctoral program. I think there will be an opportunity to use my undergraduate research on Williams in graduate-level work on how Americans reimagined older notions of rights and liberty to create a more just society.

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Williams, *The Natural and Civil History of Vermont* (Rutland: Isaiah Thomas and David Carlisle, 1794), IV.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 139.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Williams, "Philosophical Lectures by Samuel Williams, LL.D., On the Constitution, Duty, and Religion of Man," in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, ed. Merle Curti and William Tillman (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1970), 47.

<sup>5</sup> William Cronon, *Changes in the Land* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 106.

<sup>6</sup> Ralph N. Miller, "Samuel Williams' 'History of Vermont'," *The New England Quarterly* 22 (March 1949): 77.

<sup>7</sup> Merle Curti, "Introduction," in "Philosophical Lectures by Samuel Williams, LL.D., On the Constitution, Duty, and Religion of Man," ed. Merle Curti and William Tillman (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1970), 11-12.