

Forgotten Founders: The 2 Women Who Helped Establish Providence Plantation

In the summer of 1640, thirty-nine settlers gathered in the young settlement of Providence, Rhode Island, to sign a foundational civic covenant. They pledged obedience to laws made “for the public good of the body in an orderly way.” Most of the signatories were men — farmers, tradespeople, and religious dissenters who had followed the visionary Roger Williams into the wilderness after his banishment from Massachusetts. But two of the thirty-nine were women: Joan Tiler, a widow, and Jane Sears, also a widow, who signed with an X because she could not write her name. Jane was the mother of Thomas, William and daughters Jane, Parnel and Anne all from her first marriage with Andrew Harris (who died 1616). Her 2 sons had followed Roger William to Providence Plantations prior to her 1640 arrival with daughter Anne after the death of her 3rd husband James Sayers (Sears) in Northbourne, Kent, England.

That detail — a woman pressing her mark on a founding document of American self governance — deserves far more attention than history has given it.

The World They Came From

To understand how remarkable this was, you have to understand the world Joan Tiler and Jane Sears had left behind. In seventeenth-century England, and in virtually every colony along the eastern seaboard, a woman’s legal identity was defined almost entirely by her relationship to a man. Under the doctrine of *coverture*, a married woman had no independent legal existence — she could not own property, sign contracts, or participate in civic life. Her legal self was absorbed into her husband’s.

Widows occupied an ambiguous but slightly more empowered position. Because they had no living husband to subsume them, they could hold property in their own names. And in a world where civic participation was tied entirely to property ownership — the prevailing theory being that only those with a material stake in the community could be trusted to govern it — a propertied widow had, at least in principle, the same standing as a propertied man.

Providence Plantation, founded in 1636, operated on exactly this principle. Joan Tiler received a land lot directly from Roger Williams as early as 1638, making her one of the original proprietors of the settlement. Jan received her land by 1640 at her arrival. Neither was a guest or a dependent. Both were landowners with a recognized share in the community’s future. When the town formalized its government both signed alongside the men.

Roger Williams and the Radical Experiment

None of this happened by accident. The character of Providence Plantation was inseparable from the character of its founder. Roger Williams was, by any measure, one of the most radical political thinkers of his age. He insisted that land must be purchased from Native Americans rather than seized by right of discovery. He demanded the complete separation of church and state at a time when that idea was considered dangerous heresy. He founded Providence on the principle that people would be “subject only to civil law” — not religious authority, not inherited rank, not the whims of appointed governors.

In this climate, the inclusion of propertied women in civic life was less a deliberate feminist statement than a logical extension of the settlement’s founding logic: if you owned land and had a stake in the community, you belonged to it. Williams did not carve out an exception for widows. He simply applied his principles consistently, and those principles happened to include Joan Tiler and Jane Sears.

This distinguishes Providence from every other settlement in colonial America. It was not that women slipped through a legal loophole, or that a sympathetic magistrate made an exception for a wealthy widow. The women of Providence were there at the founding, in the documents, from the beginning.

A Century and a Half Ahead of Its Time

The significance becomes clear when you place it in the longer arc of American history.

The next documented instance of a woman legally casting a vote in America comes more than a century later, in 1756, when Lydia Chapin Taft — a wealthy Massachusetts widow — was permitted to vote in three town meetings in Uxbridge. This was a one-time accommodation, extended because her eldest son was too young to represent the family’s interests. It was an exception to the rule, not the rule itself.

The first time women’s voting rights were formally codified in law came with New Jersey’s state constitution of 1776, which granted suffrage to “all inhabitants” who met property requirements. In 1790, the state legislature clarified this explicitly with the words “he or she.” For roughly three decades, unmarried propertied women — and free Black property holders — voted in New Jersey elections. Poll records discovered in 2018 document at least 163 women voters casting ballots across the state between 1800 and 1807. Then, in 1807, alarmed by women’s growing electoral influence, the New Jersey legislature reversed course and restricted the vote to free white men. No state would allow women to vote again until Wyoming achieved statehood in 1890. Full national suffrage came only in 1920.

Against this timeline, Joan Tiler and Jane Sears signed the Providence Combination in 1640 — 150 years before New Jersey’s experiment, 280 years before the Nineteenth Amendment.

What Became of It

The story does not have a triumphant ending. As Providence grew and the four Narragansett Bay settlements consolidated under a Royal Charter granted by King Charles II in 1663, the informal radicalism of the early years gave way to conventional colonial governance. English legal norms — including coverture and male-only political participation — reasserted themselves gradually, not through a single dramatic act of exclusion but through the slow accretion of institutional conformity.

There was no moment when someone declared that women could no longer participate. The inclusion simply faded, the way a path through a forest disappears when people stop walking it.

Why It Matters

Joan Tiler and Jane Sears were not activists. They were not making an argument. They were widows in a frontier settlement doing what propertied members of a community did: participating in its governance. The radicalism was not theirs — it belonged to the circumstances that Roger Williams created, the circumstances that made their participation unremarkable enough to be recorded and then forgotten.

That forgetting is itself instructive. History tends to preserve the stories of people who fought for rights, not the stories of people who briefly, quietly, matter-of-factly had them. The women of Providence Plantation had civic standing before anyone thought to take it away. They were founders. Their names are in the documents.

Jane Sears pressed her X into the page in 1640 and helped bring a government into being. She could not write her name, but she signed anyway. That should be remembered.