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Brown University

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Introduction

Brown University stands as one of America's most storied institutions of higher learning—a beacon of academic freedom and innovation nestled in the cityscape of Providence, Rhode Island. Its roots reach deep into the colonial era, a time when the very idea of higher education reflected the evolving identity of a young nation. Founded in 1764, Brown quickly distinguished itself not only as the seventh-oldest college in the United States but as a pioneer in inclusivity, promising admission and instruction to students of all religious backgrounds—a stance far ahead of its time.

Yet the story of Brown is about more than just dates and names. It is a tale of transformation, bold decisions, and the passionate individuals who propelled a colonial college into an Ivy League university renowned for its distinctive spirit. From its early association with the influential Brown family to its legendary Open Curriculum, the university's history is a mirror to broader developments in American society. As America experienced revolution, growth, and social change, so too did Brown—shaping and being shaped by the ideals swirling beyond its gates.

Academic innovation has always been at the heart of Brown's identity. The university has long embraced experimentation, whether by establishing the nation's oldest applied mathematics and engineering programs or by pioneering advanced graduate studies. Its transformative move to do away with rigid core requirements in favor of student-driven learning has created generations of independent, intellectually curious students prepared to redefine their fields and communities.

The campus itself has become a living testament to Brown's enduring values. Historic red-brick structures like University Hall speak to moments both solemn and celebratory, while newer buildings designed by eminent architects host a thriving community of students, scholars, and innovators. Campus traditions and rituals, from the ceremonial opening of the Van Winkle gates to lighthearted pranks and the annual Campus Dance, forge connections between past and present, binding generations in a shared experience.

Brown's impact radiates outward, shaping not only the lives of its students but also the city of Providence, the state of Rhode Island, and the world beyond. Its robust endowment has enabled accessibility, fueling ambitious financial aid initiatives and community-engaged research. Simultaneously, Brown has reckoned with complex chapters in its own history—from confronting its ties to slavery to assuming responsibility as an economic and civic anchor in its home city.

In writing this history, the purpose is not only to chronicle institutional achievements,

but to capture the enduring spirit of Brown. This university's journey reflects a persistent belief in the value of learning, the promise of diversity, and the importance of service to both local and global communities. "Brown: The Story of an American University" invites readers to explore the people, ideas, and events that have shaped this remarkable institution—past, present, and future.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Colonial Founding: Brown's Birth in a New Nation

The year 1764 dawned upon a restless American continent, a land simmering with the nascent ideas of self-governance and burgeoning intellectual curiosity. It was within this vibrant crucible of colonial ambition that the seeds of Brown University were sown. While not yet known by its familiar name, the institution that would become Brown was chartered in this pivotal year as the College in the English Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations. Its establishment marked a significant moment in the unfolding narrative of American higher education, distinguishing itself from its peers with a revolutionary commitment to intellectual freedom.

Before 1764, the landscape of colonial colleges largely reflected the religious orthodoxies of their founders. Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, among others, were deeply intertwined with specific Protestant denominations, often requiring students and faculty to adhere to particular theological doctrines. Rhode Island, however, had long been a haven for religious dissenters, founded on principles of religious freedom by Roger Williams. This unique heritage would profoundly influence the character of its fledgling college. The charter of the College in the English Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations boldly declared that "all of the Trustees, President, and Professors shall forever be of every religious sect, and no religious test shall be required of any student." This was an unprecedented and radical departure from the prevailing norms, positioning the institution as a beacon of open inquiry in a landscape often constrained by sectarian dogma.

The visionaries behind this groundbreaking endeavor were a diverse group, united by a desire to establish a college that would serve the educational needs of the growing colony and, crucially, uphold its commitment to religious liberty. Among them were Baptists, who had faced discrimination in other colonies and sought a place where their faith, and indeed all faiths, would be respected. Prominent figures like the Reverend James Manning, a young Baptist minister and graduate of Princeton (then the College of New Jersey), emerged as a central force in the college's formation. Manning's tireless advocacy and intellectual prowess were instrumental in bringing the vision to fruition.

The initial location chosen for this progressive institution was Warren, Rhode Island, a quaint town situated on the Warren River. While seemingly an unassuming start, it provided a practical base for the nascent college. In 1765, James Manning, at the age of 27, assumed the presidency, becoming the college's first leader. His appointment signaled the beginning of a dedicated effort to transform the charter's ideals into a

tangible educational reality. Manning was not only a spiritual leader but a scholar and an administrator, tasked with the immense responsibility of building a college from the ground up in a relatively undeveloped colonial setting.

The early days in Warren were characterized by the formidable challenges inherent in establishing a new institution with limited resources. Manning, alongside a small group of tutors, began the work of crafting a curriculum and attracting students. The initial classes were modest in size, reflecting the nascent stage of the college and the demanding nature of colonial life. Yet, despite these humble beginnings, the commitment to the foundational principles of religious openness and intellectual rigor remained unwavering. The students who enrolled in these early years were pioneers themselves, embracing an educational environment that valued diverse perspectives and encouraged independent thought.

The decision to establish the college in Rhode Island was not merely geographical; it was ideological. The colony's legacy of religious freedom, enshrined in its very founding, provided the ideal intellectual and social climate for an institution that sought to transcend the sectarian divisions prevalent elsewhere. This commitment to an inclusive academic environment would become a defining characteristic of the college, setting it apart from its more religiously homogenous counterparts and laying the groundwork for its future reputation as a champion of intellectual breadth.

The initial charter, a remarkable document for its time, articulated a clear vision for the college's purpose: to promote "virtue, piety and learning." While these were common aims for colonial institutions, the explicit inclusion of religious freedom for all, without prejudice or test, was truly revolutionary. It reflected a deep-seated belief among the founders that true scholarship and intellectual growth could only flourish in an atmosphere unburdened by narrow doctrinal constraints. This principle, woven into the fabric of the college from its inception, would guide its development and influence its trajectory for centuries to come.

As word of this new, open college spread throughout the colonies, it began to attract students from various religious backgrounds, drawn by the promise of an education free from sectarian impositions. This early diversity, though modest by modern standards, was a powerful testament to the foresight of its founders and the appeal of its liberal charter. The college was not merely a place of instruction; it was an experiment in intellectual democracy, a testament to the idea that knowledge transcended denominational boundaries.

The journey from a vision to a functioning college was arduous. Resources were scarce, and the task of recruiting faculty and students, establishing a library, and constructing facilities in a developing colony was immense. Yet, the persistent efforts of President Manning and the founding trustees laid a solid foundation. They navigated the practicalities of colonial life, from securing land to raising funds, all while staying

true to the institution's pioneering ethos. The college's early years in Warren, though brief, were crucial in shaping its identity and setting the stage for its subsequent growth and relocation. It was during this period that the core values of the institution—academic excellence, intellectual freedom, and religious inclusivity—were firmly established, values that would continue to define Brown University for generations.

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