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Rhode Island

Rhode Island's political development evolved in such a manner that it neither wrote a constitution nor passed a declaration of rights until much later than its sister states. Founded by religious non-conformists banished from neighboring Massachusetts, from the beginning Rhode Islanders governed themselves as "a DEMOCRACIE, or Popular Government; that is to say, It is in the Powre of the Body of Freemen orderly assembled, or the major part of them, to make or constitute Just Lawes." Rhode Island's democratic form of government, legitimized in 1663 by a royal charter recognizing Rhode Island as a British colony, provided its freemen with more extensive rights than most other colonies. Rhode Islanders enjoyed a remarkable degree of religious liberty for the time, the right to a trial by jury, the direct-election of most state officeholders through popular elections, and lenient property qualifications for the right to vote. Furthermore, the town meetings held frequently provided a forum for initiating legislation and as a referendum on proposed legislation. Satisfied with their century-old government and the rights it conferred, Rhode Islanders opted to retain their colonial charter as the foundation for their government during the Revolutionary era, the only state besides Connecticut to do so. The Rhode Island General Assembly did enact a declaration of rights as part of a compilation of general laws in 1798. Rhode Island's first state constitution was written in 1842.

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