

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

BURN THE "GASPEE" !

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The dramatic capture and burning of the schooner "GASPEE", Lieutenant William Dudingston, R.N., Master, in Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island, on June 9th., 1772 is recalled as the spilling of "the first blood of the American Revolution".

KEN ANNETT

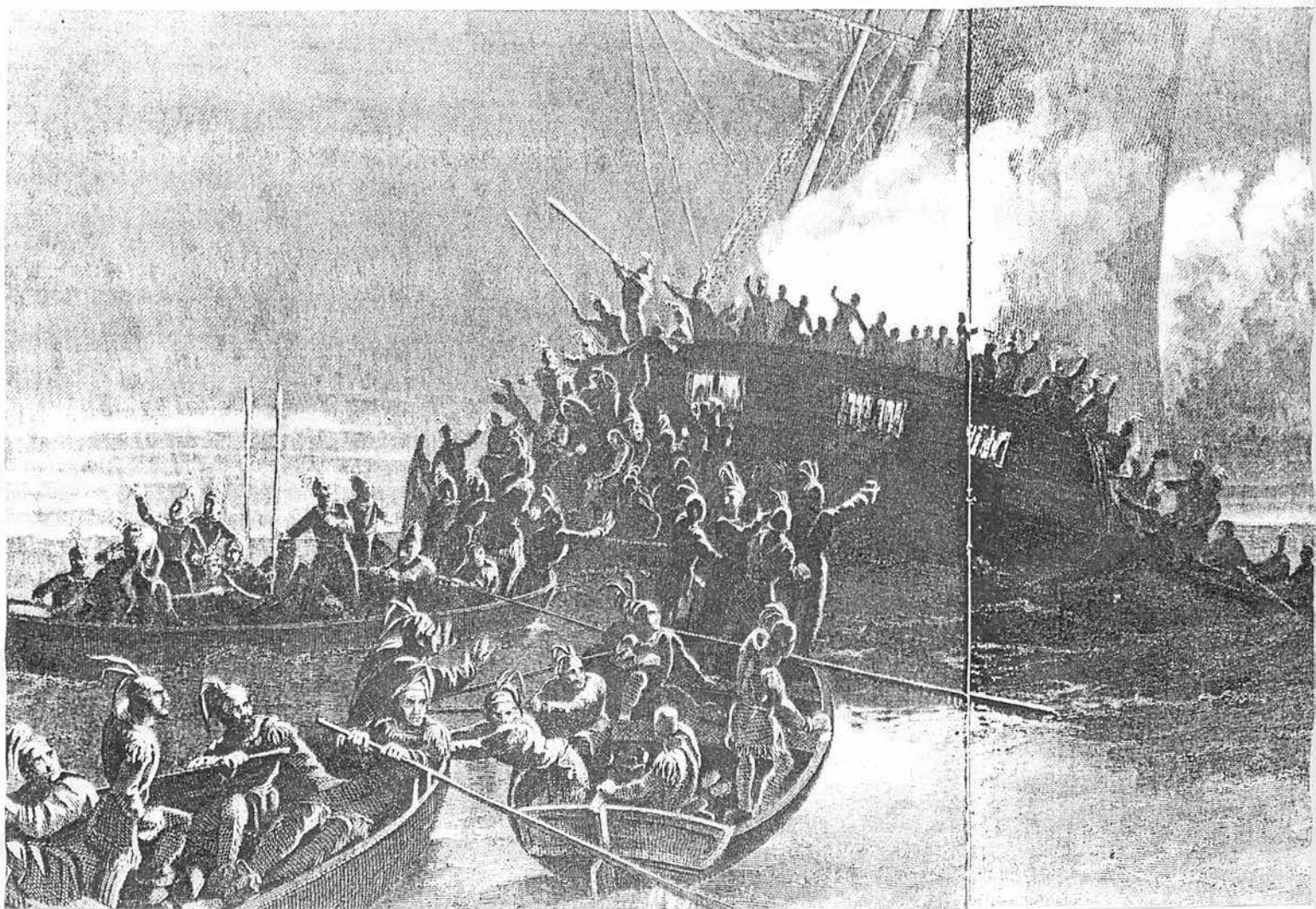
BURN THE "GASPEE" !PREAMBLE

Of the countless incidents of strife between settlers of the American colonies and the British authorities in the years prior to the American Revolutionary War, the GASPEE affair of 1772 remains enshrined in story and song. It was known, no doubt, by the Loyalists who came to settle on the shores of Gaspesia in 1784 as they would have been very aware of the tension and strife building up in the American colonies prior to the formal outbreak of hostilities. Indeed, such Loyalist memories have been reflected in a number of the previous articles in this GASPEE OF YESTERDAY series.

It was not surprising that the little colony of Rhode Island was the scene of the GASPEE affair as it had been founded by settlers of such independent mind and desire for political and religious freedom that they had left their original settlements in Massachusetts circa 1638. Indeed, so independent were these Rhode Island pioneers that some moved on from their Providence settlement to found another at Newport. The name Rhode Island was not adopted until 1644.

Newport, at the entrance to spacious Narragansett Bay, became the center of extensive activity in piracy, privateering, smuggling and legitimate trade. Cargos of rum, manufactured from West Indian sugar and molasses, were exported to Africa and exchanged for slaves to be sold in the southern colonies and the West Indies. When the British Government passed the Sugar Act of 1764 and took serious steps to enforce restrictive Navigation Acts with the Royal Navy and Customs Officials, it hit directly at Rhode Island trade and roused the ire and opposition of its independent-minded citizens.

Not surprisingly Rhode Island would play a prominent part in the struggle for independence.



THE SCHOONER "GASPEE", LIEUT. WILLIAM DUDINGSTON, MASTER, AGROUND ON NAMQUIT POINT (NOW GASPEE POINT) A FEW MILES SOUTHWEST OF PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND, IS BOARDED AND BURNED BY THE CITIZENS OF PROVIDENCE LED BY CAPTAIN ABRAHAM WHIPPLE ON JUNE 9, 1772.

PREVIOUS  
SKIRMISHES

As noted above, the imposition on the American colonies by the British Government of Navigation, Sugar and other Acts was a source of increasing friction between the colonists and the royal officials. In 1765 the naval vessel, H.M.S. MAIDSTONE, came into Newport harbour and sent a party into the town to impress men to fill its crew. The Governor of Rhode Island demanded the release of the men impressed, and when the Captain of the MAIDSTONE refused, a mob took one of the ship's boats tied up at the dock, manhandled the Officer in charge, and after hauling the boat into town they burned it. In 1769 after the revenue service sloop, LIBERTY, seized two ships carrying goods from Connecticut without the proper papers, the Captain of one of them, pulling away from the LIBERTY in a row-boat, was fired upon by the LIBERTY's crew. Shortly thereafter, while the Captain and the crew of the LIBERTY were on shore, a group of Newport roughs boarded the ship, cut down her mast, punched holes in her hull, and left her drift to a harbour island where she went aground. Then another group set the LIBERTY on fire. In April, 1771, a new Customs Collector, Charles Dudley, boarded a ship in Newport to inspect its cargo; but he foolishly did so late at night and was badly beaten by unknown assailants. He lived, and the royal officials demanded that the Governor investigate and see that the laws were obeyed. Governor Wanton explained away the incident as an attack by "drunken sailors" and added complaints about the conduct of Customs Officers in the colony.

THE GASPEE  
INCIDENT

But the outstanding case of colonial resistance was the capture and burning of His Majesty's Ship, "GASPEE" and the shooting of its Captain on June 9, 1772, a day that Rhode Islanders still celebrate. Captain William Dudingston of H.M.S. GASPEE had made himself highly unpopular by inspecting not only ocean-going vessels for contraband, but also small boats ferrying goods from one side of Narragansett Bay to the other. He suspected them of taking smuggled goods off ships that had paid no duty and moving them into warehouses. He had particularly enraged the Governor and the mercantile community by seizing a vessel loaded with rum, belonging to the Greene family of Warwick and sending it to Boston to be condemned at the superior admiralty court. When his crew got tired of eating hardtack they would row to the shore and kill a sheep or two for mutton, without bothering to pay the farmer who



Portrait of Abraham Whipple (1733-1819), privateer captain, merchant captain in the service of the Browns of Providence, commander of the attack on *Gaspee*, and hero of the Continental Navy, as painted by Edward Savage in 1786. *Courtesy of the United States Naval Academy Museum.*

owned them. Governor Wanton protested to his superior, Rear Admiral John Montagu, in Boston, who backed up Dudingston and sent the sloop, BEAVER, to help him.

On June 9th Dudingston was pursuing the colonial sloop, HANNAH, up the bay to search her for smuggled goods. By a shrewd maneuver, the captain of the HANNAH lured the GASPEE too close to shore and she ran aground on Namquit Point (subsequently known as Gaspee Point) a few miles southwest of Providence. Knowing that the tide would not come up to free the GASPEE until early the next morning, John Brown, the leading merchant in Providence, gathered some of his trustworthy friends and employees together to plan an attack. Brown provided eight longboats with muffled oars. Four leading citizens, including Brown himself and Captain Abraham Whipple (later to be named the first Commodore of the Rhode Island Navy but at that time Captain of one of Brown's slave ships) volunteered to lead the attack.

As they neared the GASPEE, at about 2:00 A.M. the ship's sentry hailed them but was given no answer. Then the Captain, Lieutenant Dudingston appeared in his shirtsleeves, fresh from his bunk. Peering into the darkness, he demanded to know who was approaching his ship. Whipple shouted, "I am the sheriff of the County of Kent; I have got a warrant to apprehend you, God damn you !; so surrender, God damn you !" At that, one of the men in Whipple's boat said to his friend, Ephraim Bowen, "Eph, reach me your gun; I can kill that fellow." Bowen lent him his gun; a shot rang out and Dudingston fell wounded on the deck. The Providence men quickly boarded the GASPEE, overcame the sleepy crew, and rowed them ashore. Brown had shown the foresight to bring along a doctor who treated Dudingston's wound. Bloodstains on the floor in the house to which Dudingston was taken were pointed out for a century thereafter as "the first blood of the Revolution". The patriots then set fire to the GASPEE and she burned slowly, slowly to the water's edge.

INQUIRY Such an incident could not pass unnoticed. The Deputy Governor began an inquiry into the destruction of the GASPEE and Governor Wanton soon offered a reward of £ 100 for information leading to conviction of the perpetrators of the "atrocious crime". Admiral Montagu fumed. In London, Parliament having recently passed an Act making it a felony punishable by death to set fire to one of His Majesty's ships, the Privy Council resolved

upon a secret Board of Inquiry to gather evidence and take such action as seemed wise.

The Privy Council chose five men to serve on this special commission. In addition to Governor Wanton, they were the admiralty judge at Boston and the chief justices of Massachusetts, New York and New Jersey. These commissioners were authorized to investigate the alleged wrongs done by naval officers in Narragansett Bay as well as the destruction of the GASPEE. It became clear as the inquiry proceeded that the commissioners disliked their task. Witnesses were both elusive and unreliable. The New York commissioner could only conclude that the GASPEE had been burnt by " a number of bold, rash, enterprising sailors, collected suddenly from the neighbourhood", but he could not find out who they were or who had organized them. The Providence people professed complete ignorance of the event. As the commissioners gave up the inquiry and went home, Ezra Stiles commented, " They have done so very little and have finished with so much stillness that we scarcely know what they have done."

Though the GASPEE incident faded in memories elsewhere, it continued to keep passions intense around Narragansett Bay. Rhode Islanders would lead in events culminating in the outbreak of hostilities at Boston in 1775.

Each year, in the month of June, Rhode Island's "GASPEE DAYS" recall these stirring events of the past.





## RHODE ISLAND

“Four gallons long, three gallons wide,” an ad advises gas-conscious drivers. Yet the nation’s smallest state stands tall among vacation spots, for it offers a wealth of choices. Narragansett Bay and the waters off Block Island conjure Eden for angler and sailor; it’s no accident that yachting’s most prestigious races begin at Newport. Old homes, historic sites, and city lights await the visitor to Providence, the state capital.

BARRINGTON: Llys-Yr-Rhosyn Rose Gardens. BRISTOL: Boatyards; Fourth of July parade held since 1785. KINGSTON: University; Indian battle monument nearby; NEWPORT: Music festival in stately mansions (July-Aug.); museums; Touro Synagogue, nation’s oldest (1763). PAWTUCKET: Restored Slater cotton mill, birthplace of U. S. textile industry. PAWTUXET: Gaspee Days festival (June). PROVIDENCE: Capitol; self-guiding tour to early houses, college buildings, spring where Roger Williams established state’s first settlement. SAUNDERTOWN: Birthplace of colonial portraitist Gilbert Stuart.

