

Gaspee Affair

The British government had a crushing debt incurred in winning the French and Indian War. It needed money, and collecting customs duties was one way of getting it.

In 1764, the British Parliament passed the Sugar Act, a tax on sugar, and the British Admiralty bought six ships 'of Marblehead design' to enforce it.

Among the first of these vessels was the schooner St. John, commanded by Lieutenant Hill. She arrived in 1764 and was immediately regarded as an enemy to the commerce of the Colony and her every movement watched.

The people of the Colony, exasperated by high-handed proceedings, fitted a schooner to attack the St. John, but were at the last moment prevented from carrying out their purpose by the arrival of a British war-ship in Newport Harbor. A crowd then proceeded to Goat Island, where they seized the fort and turned and fired the guns upon the man-of-war.

Other war-ships became more or less embroiled with the Rhode Islanders, and the trouble increased as they persisted sending officers to board American ships, inspect the crew, and seize sailors from Rhode Island merchantmen.

A brig, just arrived at home after a long voyage, expected eagerly by those who had relatives and friends among her crew was stopped when in sight of land by the English war vessel Maidstone, and her entire crew seized.

In retaliation about five hundred men of Newport seized one of the Maidstone's boats, dragged it through the streets of the town and burned it on the common in front of the court house, while a crowd, composed of the major part of the inhabitants of Newport, witnessed and applauded the deed.

Captain Reid, of the sloop Liberty, annoyed the merchants and made himself generally unpopular among the Rhode Islanders, by endeavoring to enforce obnoxious revenue laws. He was an officer of the King's navy and his vessel was regularly commissioned to assist the customs officers in Rhode Island.

A captain named Packwood, having suffered at the hands of Captain Reid, visited the Liberty to try to reason with the Captain to stop these activities, but was roughly handled. His boat was fired upon and his life endangered.

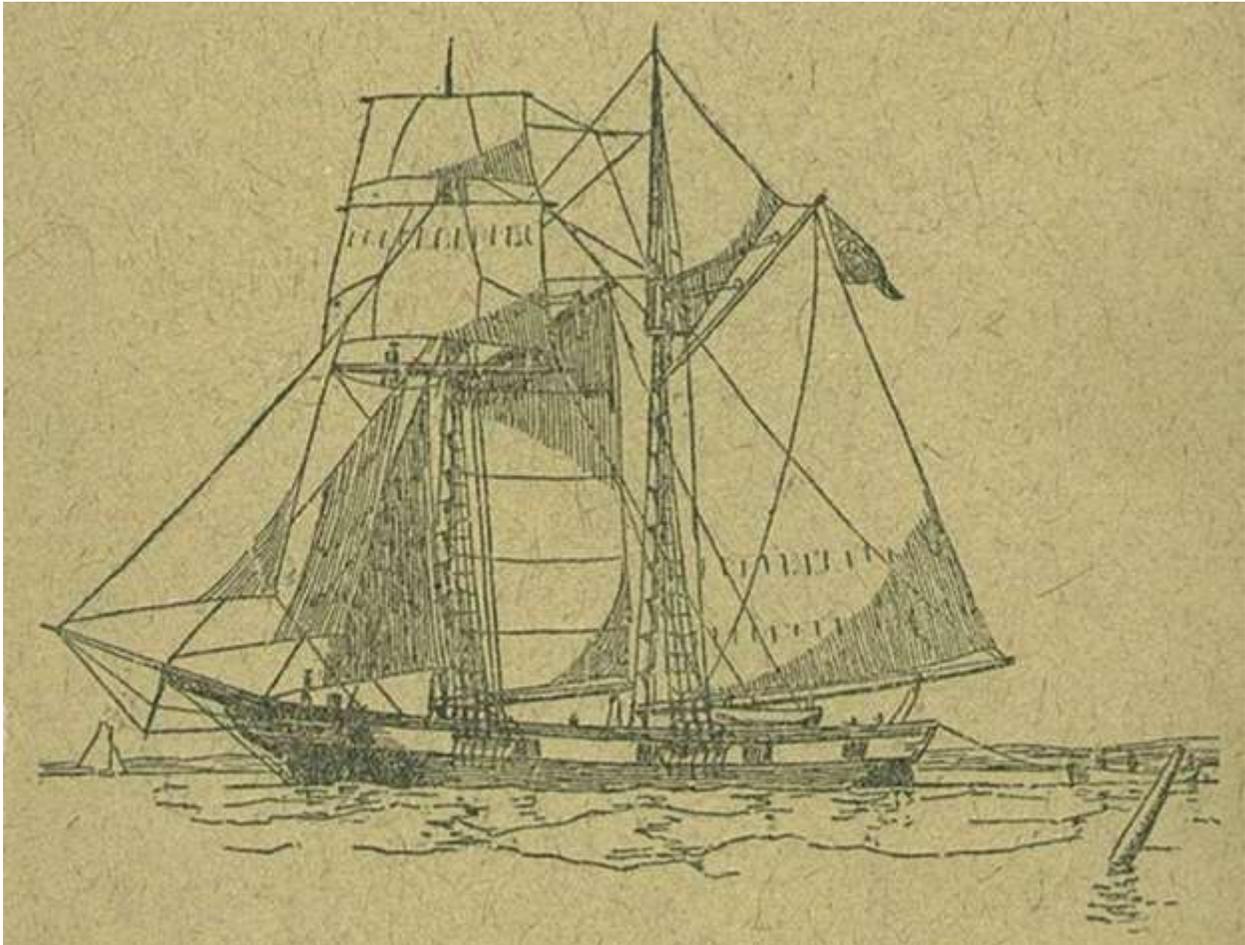
Enraged at this brutal performance, to which it is doubtful if Reid was personally a party, the people of Newport went en masse on board the Liberty, cut her cables and allowed her to drift ashore on Goat Island, where she was finally burned.

Not satisfied with the punishment meted to the St. John, the Maidstone, and the Liberty, the English Government persisted in antagonizing the liberty-loving Rhode Islanders by renewed efforts to enforce the revenue laws.

The Gaspee, a schooner of eight guns, with Lieutenant Dudingston in command, arrived in Narragansett Bay in the spring of 1772 to carry on the work for which the St. John and the Liberty had proved ineffectual.

Dudington was quite as high-handed as Reid and soon incurred the animosity of the people as his predecessors had done.

By 1772 the Gaspee had become a daily nuisance in Narragansett Bay because her crew had an incentive to collect as much customs duty as possible: They shared in it.



Darius Sessions, the Deputy Governor of Rhode Island. wrote to Governor Joseph Wanton at Newport, a letter dated from Providence on March 21, 1772, as follows :

Sir; The inhabitants of this town have of late been much disquieted in their minds by repeated advices being brought of a schooner which for some time past hath cruised in the Narragansett Bay and much disturbed our navigation.

She suffers no vessel to pass, not even packet boats, or others of an inferior kind, without a strict examination, and where any sort of unwillingness is discovered they are compelled to submit by an armed force.

Who he is and by what authority he assumes such a conduct it is thought needs some inquiry and I am requested by a number of gentlemen of this town on their behalf to acquaint your Honor therewith, and that you would take the matter into consideration and if the commander of that schooner has not as yet made proper application and been duly authorised in his proceedings,

that some proper measures be taken to bring him to account. It is suspected that he hath no legal authority to justify his conduct, and his commission, if he has any, is some antiquated paper, more of a fiction than anything else, and this seems to be confirmed by Mr. Thomas Greene who says he saw it and believes it to be no other than the commission the famous Reid had; who lost his sloop at Newport, or something else of no validity.

In consequence of the above mentioned application I have consulted with the Chief Justice thereon, who is of opinion that no commander of any vessel has any right to use any authority in the body of the colony without previously applying to the Governor and showing his warrant for so doing, and also being sworn to a due exercise of his office, and this he informs me has been the common custom in this colony.

I am Sir With the Greatest Respect our Honor's most Obedt and Humble Serv^t

Darius Sessions

A letter exchange began between Rhode Island's elected Governor, Joseph Wanton, and the captain of HMS Gaspee, Lieutenant Dudingston. The earliest exchange of letters (April 6, 1772) reveals the colonists' frustrations with Dudingston's actions, as well as a dispute regarding whether he has the authority to operate in Narragansett Bay.

"A considerable number of the inhabitants of this Colony have complained to me of your having, in a most illegal and unwarrantable manner, interrupted their trade, by searching and detaining every little packet boat plying between the several towns." (Letter from RI Governor Wanton to Lieutenant Dudingston, commander of the Gaspee)

Soon this correspondence was submitted by Dudingston to his superior, Admiral Montagu, and elicited from him an outrageous message to the Governor, bristling with offensive criticisms and personal reflections.

The Admiral evidently did not comprehend the status of a colony living under such a charter, and electing its Governor in a manner quite democratic. Montagu's ridiculous assumption of a right to lecture and advise a man of Wanton's position and character drew forth from that gentleman a dignified though trenchant reply, and the correspondence on both sides was then submitted to the Secretary of State for the Colonies.

Rhode Island was fed up with the Gaspee; so much so that on May 20, 1772, Gov. Joseph Wanton wrote a letter to the British secretary of state complaining about her. He argued the Gaspee's crew didn't have the right to seize a quantity of rum and try the owner outside of the colony of Rhode Island. On top of that, they insulted the colonists with 'the most abusive and contumelious language.'

Lieutenant Dudingston continued his harassment, infuriating merchants and threatening to cripple the economy. Eventually Governor Wanton appealed to the Earl of Hillsborough, England's Secretary of State for the colonies, for assistance. However Dudingston had pushed Rhode Islanders too far.

Her captain's persistent harassment of Rhode Island merchants led to a group of Rhode Islanders to retaliate. The attack is the first major armed act of rebellion against the British crown, and the subsequent investigation prompted the colonies to consider united action against England.

On the morning of June 9, 1772, Hannah, a medium-sized packet boat captained by Benjamin Lindsey, began sailing north from Newport to Providence.

As expected, Lieutenant Dudingston aboard Gaspee gave chase and the two ships worked their way up Narragansett Bay. About six miles from Providence, Hannah tacked across shallow water, and Gaspee, a much larger ship, followed and ran aground. Hannah continued on to Providence, leaving Gaspee stranded on Namquit Point.

They concluded the Gaspee would be grounded until well after midnight when the rising tide could free her and now saw a way to rid Rhode Island's merchants of the ship commanded by the much-hated William Dudingston.

Brown ordered eight longboats delivered to Fenner's Wharf, their oars and oarlocks muffled. He sent a drummer around town to announce the grounding of the Gaspee. Anyone interested in destroying that troublesome vessel should go to James Sabin's house, right next to Fenner's Wharf.

Ephraim Bowen, about 19 years old, answered the call. He grabbed his father's gun, powder and shot and found a crowd at Sabin's. His friend, 18-year-old Joseph Bucklin, a tavern-keeper's son, had arrived, too. Later that evening, men gather at Sabin's Tavern in Providence and plan an assault.

On that moonless night, more than 100 Sons of Liberty silently rowed out in a line of longboats to the Gaspee;

Dudingston leaned over the starboard gunwale in his white shirt and demanded, "Who goes there?"

Capt. Abraham Whipple replied, 'I want to come on board.'

The return was, 'Stand off, you can't come on board.'

On which Capt. Whipple roared out, 'I am the sheriff of the County of Kent; I am come for the commander of this vessel, and have him I will, dead or alive. Men, spring to your oars!' when we were in an instant on her bows.

Joseph Bucklin, standing on the main seat of the longboat, realized he had a shot at Dudingston.

"Epe, reach me your gun and I can kill that fellow,' he said to Ephraim Bowen. Bucklin then fired at Lt. William Dudingston, hitting him in the arm and lower abdomen. He exclaimed, "I have killed the rascal." (Dudingston fell back, but was only wounded.)

Today, Rhode Islanders celebrate that shot as the 'First Shot of the Revolutionary War.'

Soon after all the party were ordered to depart, leaving one boat for the leaders of the expedition, who soon set the vessel on fire and consumed her to the water's edge.

The following morning, Sessions learned of the attack and began an investigation, taking testimony from two of the Gaspee crew.

Lieutenant Dudingston refused to testify until he can report the events to his commanding officer.

On June 12, 1772, Governor Wanton issued a proclamation offering a reward to anyone who can offer information regarding the Gaspee burning.

“I have, therefore, thought fit... to issue this Proclamation, strictly charging and commanding all His Majesty’s Officers...

to exert themselves with the utmost Vigilance, to discover and apprehend the Persons guilty of the aforesaid atrocious Crime...”

“And I do hereby offer a Reward of ONE HUNDRED POUNDS ... to any Person or Persons who shall discover the Perpetrators of the said Villainy to be paid immediately upon the Conviction of any one or more of them.”

In August 1772, with the investigation making little progress, King George III issued a proclamation offering rewards of up to £1000 to anyone who can supply the names of those responsible for the destruction of the ship and the injury to its commanding officer.



He names five officials from different colonies to carry out his orders. They are known as the Gaspee Commission.

With his proclamation, King George III also sends instructions for the Gaspee Commissioners. They include a command to send any accused attackers to England for trial.

From September 1772 to June 22, 1773, the Commission conducts its investigation, issuing warrants and taking testimony from Gaspee crew and people believed to have knowledge of the attack.

After ten months, the Commissioners end their investigation. In their final report to King George III, they explain that due to contradictory evidence and coerced testimony, they are unable to name any of the perpetrators of the crime.

“Upon the whole, we are all of the opinion that the several matters and things contained in said depositions do not induce a probable suspicion, that persons mentioned therein... are guilty of the crime aforesaid.”

The burning of the Gaspee is celebrated in Rhode Island as an important early strike against the tyranny of the crown. However it was the King's threat to try the accused in England, rather than on native soil by a jury of their peers, that had the most lasting effect. In his autobiography Thomas Jefferson writes:

“...a court of inquiry held in Rhode Island in 1772, with a power to send persons to England to be tried for offences committed here was considered at our session of the spring of 1773 as demanding attention.”

This affair created intense excitement not only in Rhode Island but throughout the American Colonies and the investigation which followed, instead of alleviating the excitement, kept it at fever heat.

It was a powerful incentive to resistance in the minds of the people, whose thoughts were thus gradually becoming familiar with the idea of armed self-protection against the efforts of the Crown to interfere with their rights and liberties. (Bacon)

Soon after, understanding that the colonies' many grievances are best addressed with a “unity of action,” a meeting of deputies from every colony is proposed. These deputies become the First Continental Congress.

Information here is primarily from Rhode Island Department of State; Narragansett Bay by Bacon;

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young